THE THREE CURATES

AUTHOR OF

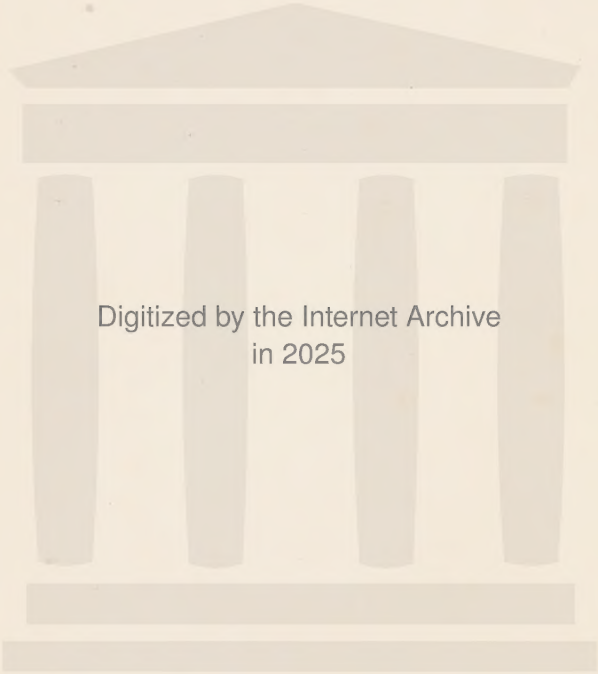
"BROKEN SUNSHINE"

"AS SOON KILL A MAN AS KILL A BOOK."

Thomas · Arthur · Jones.

What is a man
If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.

THE THREE CURATES.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THE THREE CURATES.

A Novel.

BY

MRS. G. BIGG-WITHER,

Author of "BROKEN SUNSHINE."

"Nothing is new; we walk where others went;
There's no vice now but has its precedent."

—HERRICK.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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THE THREE CURATES

CHAPTER I.

"HEIGHO! I am getting quite tired of this place, mother. I never did care for the country. One requires to have a soul to the manner born; and except Aunt Louisa and Uncle Harry there really *is* no one decent to speak to."

"There are two of the curates?"

"Oh! well, yes! They can be thrown in with the Rectory party—so hardly count."

"It *is* unfortunate that Miss Higgins and Miss Curtis—to say nothing of Mrs. Grantley—should all be away just now."

"Mother, if you remark, all country

people do go to town for the cattle-show week, as if they didn't see enough of their animals at home! Oh! but they love to see how fat they can get their poor beasts, without quite killing them. I do think it's all horrid!"

"I do not fancy either Mrs. Grantley or Miss Higgins or Miss Curtis have gone for the cattle-show," said Lady Laura, quietly. "Have you heard Sir Ernest Beldon is going very shortly to marry that little Miss Curtis?"

"No, mother!" said Mrs. Cohen, with awakening interest.

"Your Aunt Louisa told me this morning, in tones of the most perfect delight."

"She is a sweet little thing! and always dressed like a little princess. Young Beldon was her shadow, at Homburg. I remember them, and the millionaire, Miss Higgins—plain, sallow, cold, satirical, but

very clever. She has such a rich contralto voice. She is not really bad."

"And she is going to be married!"

"She! Mother! Who to?"

"Can you keep a secret, Pauline, for a little while?"

"I think I have had a good deal of keeping secrets these last few years. Yes, I can keep one. What is the particular one, mother, that there is so much mystery?"

"Gerald Lanyon is going to marry Miss Higgins."

"Mother!"

"It is a fact."

Mrs. Cohen cogitated a few moments.

"Why, mother! they are exactly suited. *She* is rich, clever, and good. *He* is ditto, ditto, ditto. And they are both—ugly!"

"Do you not feel sorry to have missed him, Pauline?" said her mother, gently.

"Not in the *very least*, dear. I am

neither clever nor good, but I am quite happy in *my* way, which would not be *their* way—small things and small interests amuse me. Just a comfortable income, dear old Charlie, and dear old mother! So you see, mamsie dear, my ambition is not great—

> 'The happy have whole days, and those they choose;
> The unhappy have but hours, and those they lose.'

And when we get settled in town, I shall have all I want, and shall take care not to lose anything pleasant that comes in my way."

"And so Aunt Louisa is happy over the matrimonial arrangements of her friends! She *is* a dear old thing! so nice and homely! I don't wonder she is their confidant. It would not be in your way at all," said Pauline, saucily. "I could not fancy you having other people's love affairs on hand."

"Certainly not!" said Lady Laura,

severely. "I have had something else to do in my life."

"Never mind, mother. You have nothing now except to be happy. Uncle Christopher kindly departed this life almost entirely for your benefit."

"Hush, Pauline!"

"But, mother, he was horrid! All these years he never even gave us a five-pound note! Cross-grained, stingy old thing! Why should I say I care for him? I don't. His money will be very useful; but think how we should have appreciated a little kindly sympathy, a few little gifts, in the days gone by! He knew how badly we were off. Oh no, mother, you must not expect *me* to regret him. On the contrary, it was the most graceful action of his life to die when he did, because it makes you thoroughly independent."

"It does not make me forget your love,

Lina darling," said her mother, with unwonted tears in her eyes.

"Mother dear! My ideas may be foolish and silly; but I think, if you, and I could not share our little store when we *had* the chance: I should have been unworthy of your love or Charlie's goodness. It is the first and simplest of laws: 'Honour thy father and mother,' etc., etc., etc. At least, I believe in deeds, not words. Now, mother, let's go out or do something. Oh, I know! Aunt Louie will take us to see Miss Higgins' pictures, and porcelain paintings, and other things—the very thing!" And as Pauline's words were as impulsive and various as an April sky, her mother agreed at once, and they walked over to the Rectory to catch Lady Louisa.

Lady Louisa was quite willing to do them this little service, and very proud of the beautiful things collected in her beloved

friend's dwelling. Both Lady Laura and her daughter were quite able to appreciate their beauties.

"When I have a house again, mother, everything shall be fresh and bright and pretty. I must try and pick up a few lovely things when we go abroad again. I shall save all my money for that purpose."

"Things of beauty that are joys for joys for ever, Pauline?" said Aunt Louisa, kindly.

"Yes, Auntie dear! And they *do* go to make up the sum total of happiness."

It was a lovely morning, bright, crisp, clear. The tailor had not proved himself "a man," for Esmé had to don her old habit. But what did it matter? Duke's skin shone like satin, and Esmé's heart bounded with joy.

There was the large open carriage at the door, with Hester and Lady Willis, and Sir Philip sitting opposite to them. Then down the steps came Esmé, looking like a stray sunbeam. Sir Ernest helped her to mount, and then they two rode round the carriage for the ladies to inspect them at all points; but this did not please the Duke, who, having no vanity himself, preferred to be doing. So the two young people rode ahead; and old Charles, keeping a severe eye on the advance guard, followed briskly. Everybody enjoyed it. The Row was full of equestrians; and many a glance of approval was cast at Esmé and her escort as they passed up and down, while the carriage made the longer circuit of the Park.

"Now the Cattle Show is over there is nothing worth staying for, and I do not want to lose a day's hunting. So, if you

can oblige me, my Lady, by being ready to-morow, I shall feel grateful."

"Very well, Percy. Only write and tell them what time to meet us at Crosby to-morrow."

"To be sure, I will."

"I think after all I shall return to Combe Towers for Christmas," said Hester. "The arrangement of those two make all the difference in my plans. I shall like to have Esmé with me at home. Somehow one never does feel at home in furnished houses, but always birds of passage. The truth is, we are such creatures of habit, and our surroundings influence us unconsciously.

"Simply there's no place like home," said Sir Percy tersely.

"No. I believe that is it. In all our wanderings it *is* nice to feel one has a home—where you need not live always in company."

"Where you can shut the door of your castle and be as disagreeable as you please!" replied Sir Percy. "I believe in a good storm every now and again. It clears the atmosphere. What do you say, my lady?"

"That I prefer a calm, most decidedly."

"With a good deal of sunshine," said Hester.

"Yes," said Lady Willis, "exactly."

"It is nearly lunch-time," said Miss Higgins, looking at her watch; "and I think we had better turn homewards, and I daresay the two will follow us, though it is delicious enough for anything. Home, Charles."

And they were half-way through lunch when the truants returned, flushed, delighted, and happy.

Both Hester and Esmé found the time to fly, so much had they to do. And Hester

had not the heart to banish Sir Ernest, who was drawn by an irresistible attraction to Connaught Terrace; but there really was a great deal to do in a very short time. Justine and Hester were indefatigable, and these two did without Esmé as much as possible, so that the Duke was in constant requisition, and the young couple, duly escorted by Charles, who looked after them as conscientiously as any chaperon. In fact, Ernest looked upon him as an old nuisance.

"Never mind, Ernest; it won't be for ong. When we are married, we can do without a groom when we ride."

"Rather! Now, Esmé, let us settle what sort of furniture you would like for Heminglee. It requires a lot of doing up and renovating."

"First, a good piano and some very nice pictures," said the future Lady Beldon.

"If I am to have a sitting-room of my own, I should like the walls a very pale pink, and—shall we ask Hester to go with us to-morrow, Ernest? Then we can choose what we like at Maple's or other places."

"By all means," said the young man. "It will assist me so much if I only know what my little lady-love does like. I want you to love Heminglee!"

"I am sure I do that now. Hester is going to give me some lovely things. Bronzes, pictures, some real Persian carpets, and a necklace of pearls that belonged to a great princess."

"Well, nothing is too good for you!" said Sir Ernest, with conviction.

"Only Hester is so noble, so generous! Oh! she is a *darling!* I hope she will be as happy as I am."

"She is all that. And if she marries

Lanyon, I think she will be very happy, Esmé."

"She deserves it. For she only thinks of others. Ernest, Old Charles is looking dinner-time. I know that expression. I suppose it really is time to go back; but it is very delicious, and *I* do not seem to require any lunch. Where are we going to-night?"

"To see 'The Pink Dominos.'"

Somewhat reluctantly they turned their horses' heads homewards. But Charles was a personage accustomed to receive attention, and his dinner was a very serious and important business. And although he was willing to be kindly indulgent to the lovers, still, there were limits to his amiability. However, he was in time to preside with his usual dignity; and his mistress, Miss Higgins, was waiting with some impatience for Esmé, who was re-

quired by Madame Stephanie to try on various garments. Next week they were all to return to Combe Towers, so much work had to be got through.

The next day was passed by them all in shopping. And Ernest found even being engaged had its drawbacks, for they all became very tired and fagged out, and were not sorry when the day came for them all to return to Langton.

Immediately after Christmas Sir Ernest was to go to Heminglee and begin arrangements there. There was much to be done, and not too much time.

Sir Percy and Lady Willis had returned to their own home. And Heminglee was to be given over to the workmen. Ernest was most anxious his home should be worthy of the fair young bride.

Then he wanted to have a charming little pony carriage he had set his heart upon,

for Esmé, and to match the ponies was now a matter of supreme importance. But in spite of all he was very happy, for his mind was at rest. Esmé was his first and last love. He was not like so many young men, whose freshness of feeling and whose heart had been frittered away in idle flirtations. For years he had loved the young girl, little more than a child, as he often met her, to and fro, as she went to the Conservatoire to study her music. And it had been with keen pain he had seen her girlish love for handsome Cyril Dashwood. But that was all over, past and done with. He felt sure of her, and her love, and that he reigned supreme in her heart. He had waited, and the reward had come. Hester had been his true friend throughout, and he knew he could best repay her by making the child of her adoption happy, and that he fully intended.

CHAPTER II.

Far down in the soft Devonian county, stood Luscombe Manor. It was a stately old place. Ancient and grey, beautiful for situation, built on an eminence overlooking the Bristol Channel, though a good mile inland. But from its old mullioned windows could be seen the distant sea, sometimes grey, sometimes blue, sometimes sparkling like thousands of diamonds, but always varying, like the woof of life. When the wind blew towards the land, it would bring forth its invigorating odour and tales of the sea. Its thunder against the rocks, its contempt for the puny efforts of man, its rage, its gentle love song, all came up—with its ever changing, yet ever old refrain—to the grey house on the hill, that

could look over the wide expanse of water, and in the faint blue distance discern the Welsh coast. The soft, humid air, that made the verdure so exquisitely beautiful, seemed to have tinged the stonework of the old "Manor" into delicate greys, and reds, and russet browns. And the setting sun would rest on its old windows, with their stained glass, in loving dalliance; flooding the rooms with rich colours, and lighting up dark corners and crannies, bringing out the old cunning carvings on sideboard and mantelpiece, and making the old Lanyons stand out from their ancient frames like living creatures.

These same ancestors in their early days had gone forth to the Crusades. Many, in later years, had fought and bled for their country. None seemed to have lived entirely for themselves, save a certain Sir Walter Lanyon, who had lived an evil life

during the latter portion of the eighteenth century, and contracted many a gambling debt, which seriously crippled the estate. Moreover, he was much at court, and occasionally had the honour of replenishing the Royal purse (at his own expense). So that between his Royal friend and himself, the old manor of Luscombe suffered severely. Neither was this particular Baronet troubled with morality or conscience, for he enjoyed his brandy and his other liquors all the more for being smuggled. How he escaped the clutches of the law seemed wonderful to many good and innocent people. And with all his many bad deeds, that he should die in his bed, passed their comprehension! But if His Royal Highness did not pay back in kind and coin, he did in deed, and somehow the ægis of his questionable protection was thrown over his quondam friend, who died

as comfortably as an attack of inward gout would allow him, leaving to his grandson, Sir Horace Lanyon, an estate charged with mortgages and debts. And it was only owing to the long life of self-denial and good management, that the old place was once more beginning to assert its own dignity, and to resume its former position in the county. But its owner was old and mournful and lonely, and the sceptre seemed almost too heavy for the feeble old hands. No cheery voice of youth gladdened the old home—the many closed rooms, the barred shutters, that the bright sunshine tried in vain to penetrate, and could only peep in through cracks and holes.

Sir Horace Lanyon had been stricken with a severe and wasting illness; but it was an illness that had attacked many before him when hope is gone, and there seems nothing left but to turn one's face to

the wall and die. Sir Horace had married late in life, and after two or three years of such perfect happiness as only comes for a short period to anyone, the wife of his heart left him, leaving as her representative an infant son, who had cost his mother her life. This terrible blow caused the man of fifty to become prematurely old, and he had lived only for his son, and when the young lad grew to manhood, nearly ready to take his place in the world, he had begged his father, to let him make a tour through Europe. His parent could deny him nothing that his soul longed for, but it was with a sad foreboding he saw him set out with his tutor. And who can tell the agony of the father, when the lifeless form of the young gallant lad was brought back to the home of his ancestors, crushed almost out of recognition, by a terrible accident on those stern unyielding snow-clad mountains of

Switzerland, who demand their yearly insatiable tribute of human life as, the punishment of man's temerity and rashness. Then the old man felt that fortune had done her worst. There was nothing more left but death, and that would be as an angel's message.

But as yet it came not. He saw no one at last. It was his faithful old servant who brought to his mind that there was yet one left who bore his name—his long neglected nephew—the son of his dead step-brother. So he desired his lawyer to inform his heir of his decision to allow him a handsome yearly income, but he expressed no wish to see him. Sir Horace could not bring himself to that yet, and so a year or two passed by. Then came a very serious illness, and the old baronet felt his end was near, and Percival, his friend and servant, persuaded him at last to send for the young man.

"It is not, sir, as if he were a stranger, he's our own family, Sir Horace."

"True, Percival, I am very sorry though my nephew is a parson."

"Well, sir, it *is* a bit unfortunate, as all the Lanyons have been warriors or statesmen; but I've heard Mr. Gerald is a rare one for duty. He always was a nice young gentleman, leastways when he was a boy."

"Well, then Percival, we will send for him."

"We will, sir!" And as old Percival allowed no grass to grow under his feet, the heir was sent for, and the day had come for his arrival.

The old baronet laid back in his chair, his pale pathetic face refined and sharpened by suffering of heart and body. His thin, almost transparent hands lay listlessly over the arms of his chair, his wasted form carefully covered over with wraps. The fire-

light was bringing out in bold relief the white head and worn face, the old crimson hangings over the windows, the old mouldy books, of bygone days, that lined the walls of the room, the black oak beams which ran across the ceiling, the high carved mantelpiece, all were tinted by the red fire-glow, and brought into fitful prominence.

"Percival! I think I *should* like to see Master Gerald again! It is many years since we met. And then he always looked so much stronger than my poor boy, and that used to vex me, Percival. My nephew, too, may have been lonely. He is an orphan, and his mother was so beautiful, so beautiful," said the old man dreamily, "and yet, she preferred that pale sickly brother to me. Ah! I never thought in my own selfishness of their lonely little lad—and perhaps *he* will resent it now."

"Never fear! Sir Horace. Master

Gerald is not that sort. The pity is we did not send for him before."

"You are right, Percival. I am much to blame. Will he be here, think you, to-night?"

"For certain, sir! I have sent Matthew and the dogcart to the station."

"Make up the fire! Light all the candles and the lamps—try and make it look cheerful. The house, alas, *is* dull! Almost its light has gone down."

"Nay, nay, sir! We have no right to say that as long as there is a Lanyon left."

* * * * *

"Hark! Percival!" And the sounds of carriage wheels were heard outside. "Go and greet Mr. Lanyon."

Percival hastily left the room, and very soon returned, escorting Gerald. He came with quick bold steps to where his uncle sat, his face full of sympathetic feeling.

"My dear uncle! I *am* glad to find you able to sit up! it is a great relief!"

"Nephew, you are heartily welcome! Forgive a selfish old man—his long neglect, and for keeping you out of your rightful home."

"Dear uncle, there *can* be no neglect. I *must* always appear in your eyes as a usurper."

"Ah, no! You are my brother Ralph's son; henceforth you are mine, and perhaps Lettice and Ralph will forgive me."

Gerald held both the old man's hands in his strong ones, almost conveying in the touch his own firm protecting nature. It seemed by its very sympathy to revive his uncle. For there came on the old worn face a happy smile. Ah Gerald! you are like your great-great-grandfather. He had your rugged strong face. You must see his picture, the likeness is striking! Now

Percival, take my nephew to his rooms, and then to dinner. Afterwards, Gerald, you will return to me?"

"Indeed I will!"

Percival accompanied the young man to his apartments, and after seeing to all his requirements, addressed him with all the affectionate interest so far removed from familiarity—and only to be found in old servants who have grown grey in the family's service.

"Sir! I am proud to see you here, and I do hope, Master Gerald, you won't be for going away again! Do make your home here, sir! The master is so lonesome. You see, sir, we are only two old men together. I do my best for him, but——"

"Ah, Percival! I can see that!" said Gerald, grasping the faithful hand. "Has my uncle suffered much?"

"Not so much in absolute pain like, but

he's run down, sir! And there seems nothing to keep him alive. But I do think sir! between you and me, he might go on for long. If we could only make it worth his while to live! Something to interest him! Something to make him happy!"

"We will make him happy, God helping us, Percival. This shall be my home. And not a bad one either!" said Gerald, cheerily.

"Thank you, sir!" said old Percival, greatly comforted. "And now I will just step back to the master, and return for you in a few moments!"

"All right, Percival, don't hurry on my account."

Percival found his master with a gentle little smile on his face.

"I think we shall be happy, Percival!"

"I am *sure* we shall, Sir Horace! It is

so pleasant to have a strong man about, we are getting old, sir!"

"That is true, Percival. My nephew is tall and strong, as becomes a Lanyon. The only two exceptions were my brother Ralph, and my own dear lad."

"Now, sir! If you please, you must take your medicine," said the old servant briskly. "And if you *could* just get a little nap, while Master Gerald is having his dinner, you would be ready and fresh for a nice chat later on."

"To be sure! to be sure! I will try, and Percival! see that my nephew has every possible attention. In fact! impress the servants that he is to be treated *precisely* as myself!"

"Certainly Sir Horace." And after lowering the shades of the candles, the man softly withdrew.

CHAPTER III.

Mrs. Grantley was sitting alone in her pretty morning-room, in Cavendish Square. It may seem strange that she should have her dwelling among so many of the "Faculty," but so it was. Her kind and indulgent husband, the late Professor Grantley, among his other gifts had left her his comfortable Town house for her sole use and occupation. And here she sat one cold December morning. Outside it was raw and foggy, but inside there was warmth and pleasant refinement. The fire burned brightly and cheerily in the grate. Russian violets and stephanotis diffused a dainty perfume, while tall plants blossomed in soft-hued pots, making believe it was summer.

The owner sat near the fire, her pretty feet on the fender—the light at her back, showing the nape of a soft white neck, and touching up the bronze-coloured hair piled over her head. Then she moved her chair from the fire, drew her long flowing draperies around her and fell to consider. Her face was grave, but by no means sad; and again she held up a letter which had lain open on her lap.

"After all these years! It is like a message from the dead." And she read it once more.

"Edith, by some strange chance, a stray newspaper (an old *Lancet*) fell into my hands (it was in looking over the possessions of a dead friend of mine), and almost the first paragraph that caught my eye was about your late husband; it was a short editorial, lamenting his loss in the medical

and scientific world. Oswald Grantley had been my foe, forgive me speaking thus strongly. He may have been the worst husband to you, or the best, I have no means of judging—all I know was that I had been defrauded of my bride—my love of years. Can I forgive the traitor who did this ? for traitor there must have been. All these long weary years, I have had time to think it over. The letter I wrote to you, you never received, for it was returned unopened. At first I thought out of disdain, you would not read it. But it was so unlike your kind heart, that afterwards, I felt *sure* there was some underhand agency at work. And you must have thought me false, or dead. And, Oh, Edith! I heard of your marriage to Oswald Grantley. It was useless to write after that. And now from that stray old newspaper, nearly three years old, I find

you are a widow unless——no, I will not think *that*, I will not suppose anything. I shall come straight to England by the first steamer. I should say, if I catch 'The Bangalore,' I shall be in the old country two months from this date. Of course, I shall send this to your brother, Edward's club. I have a presentiment we shall meet again! and it cheers me beyond all expression.

"Always your faithful friend,

"SELWYN LUTTRELL."

His letter is dated October the eighth, and this is December the twentieth! Why he may be here any day! if he catches the mail. How strange it all is! It is ten years since I saw him. What an ugly ducking he was to be sure. I wonder—but she concluded her thoughts by springing up, and gazing steadfastly into a little

plush-framed mirror, and there she saw a very piquant face, a saucy little nose, bewitching brown eyes, so dark as to be nearly black, but capable of every subtlety of expression. A clear pale skin, while her dark wavy hair had a ruddy tinge, that gave a warmth to the dark curls. A charmingly rounded figure—yes, at thirty-four, Mrs. Grantley need have no fears of any rivals. She was bright, witty, clever—a charming woman in fact. She had an ample income, and for the last year, she had devoted much time to her step-brother, occasionally she came up to her house in Town, and there she was this dull December day, puzzled but expectant.

"Of course, he might be in time for Christmas Day at Langton! Poor old Selwyn! he always cared so much more for me, than I for him. Did I love him

at all? It is so long ago, I can't remember. Ah, Lucy, poor girl, you did him a bad turn and yourself no.good. Heigho! *how* time flies."

"Colonel Luttrell!" announced Mrs. Grantley's trim parlour-maid.

"Selwyn!"

"Edith!" And Colonel Luttrell held out his two hands, and eagerly grasped Mrs. Grantley's. There he stood: A tall, soldierly figure, bronzed and grey, of about forty years; a face strongly marked—with energy and determination legibly written across it. He looked into his companion's face—as if he would see into her very soul. And there he saw a little mutinous look, a kind regard, a *soupçon* of love; but not the love he hoped and longed for. Well! he would wait.

"Why, Selwyn! *where* have you sprung from? See! I have only just read your

letter, and, before I can think, here you are! But you are *very* welcome!" and she pressed his hand with kindly warmth.

"I landed in London yesterday, drove to an hotel, had a bath, some food, went to Edward's club, got his address, telegraphed for yours, received it, and—here I am! I should have come last night, only it was so late. I feared you might be from home or have friends.

"Edith! are you glad to see me?"

"Most glad, Selwyn!"

"You are handsomer than ever! You always were a lovely, teasing girl; and now I find you a beautiful woman—but with all the old mischief, or else I am very much mistaken. I do not believe you are one whit improved!—and I am not sure that I should care for any improvement."

"Thank you for your kind indulgence,"

said she, shaking her head at him. "And now, Selwyn, do sit down like a Christian and tell me all about yourself! Have you left the army or are you on leave, and what have you been doing all these long years?"

"I have not left the army and I have a year's leave; I have never been out of India since I set foot in it; I have been engaged in frontier wars mostly; have had two or three unimportant wounds. I have, on the whole, led rather a solitary life—I mean personally, of course."

"And you never married?"

"Married! certainly not! Why should I?"

"Why should you not?"

"Edith, you are neither fair nor just! There was only one woman in the world for me! and she—she was married!"

Mrs. Grantley was silent.

"Tell me!" he asked with some sternness, "Who played the traitor with my letters?"

"My sister Lucy!"

"By Heavens! I will settle with her!" he said grimly.

"You cannot! She is beyond your reach."

"Beyond my reach! and in what way?"

"She is dead!"

"Dead! When did she die?"

"Two years ago!"

Then, after a pause, he asked, "*Why* did she behave so wickedly, so cruelly? blasting my life, crushing the very heart out of me. Why did she do so, I say?" his steel-blue eyes flashing with anger till they looked almost black.

"Selwyn, forgive her! for she loved you herself? She begged your forgiveness

before she died. Do try and think kindly of her!"

"She is beyond the reach of my forgiveness now."

There was a long silence. Each was going over old ground. And Mrs. Grantley was debating with herself—Did she love the man now before her in the old days so very much? No, she knew she did not. He worried her into loving him. His ways were masterful then. They were masterful now. She would almost be afraid of him. She was very happy and satisfied; she did not want to be in love at all. Why should she be forced into what would disturb the pleasant even tenour of her life? If he would only be satisfied with her friendship! He remembered the fair girlish Lucy. Yes. He could see many traits of love in her conduct *now*, which years ago passed totally unobserved. The little love tokens,

the flowers, the many little thoughts, and acts, and deeds, all ignored by him, in the pursuit of the elder sister, with her bewitching, tantalising tricks—so hard to win, so elusive. He never felt sure if she had been won at all. And she was in nowise altered, he could see that. But she was one of those women whom one watches, follows, loves, without trying to resist, the very pleasure of the pursuit giving a feverish happiness. While for Lucy Lewis he felt no remorse. She had come between himself and happiness.

"Tell me about yourself. Have you been happy," he asked jealously, "all these years?"

"Yes, Selwyn. Happy! My husband was *very* good to me."

"He was twenty years older than you?"

"Yes."

"You have no children?"

"No."

"I am glad of that."

"Why?" she asked, with a laugh.

"Because I should have been jealous of them. They would have been his children."

"But——"

"No 'buts' for me. I see you are as troublesome as ever, but I mean to make you love me, sooner or later. I am not going to be defrauded out of my happiness for the rest of my life."

"Upon my word, Colonel Luttrell! I suppose I do not count in this ultimatum!"

"Oh, yes, you do, very considerably. However, we will leave that now, and please tell me about Edward."

"He is well. His wife died some years ago. He has been Mayor of Langton, and has been elected again for another year, and I"—making him a deep curtsey—"am the 'mayoress,' at your service."

"Upon my word! Then I suppose you are a good deal with him?"

"Yes. We seem to have clung together. He has always been so good to me. Dear fellow!"

"He has given up his practice in London?"

"Oh, yes; and all he does now is among the very poor, and those he physics free, gratis, and for nothing. When he is not doing that, he is adding to his collection of insects 'and other vermin,' as an old country farmer calls them; he intends writing a book on natural history. And between whiles he attends committees, gives away prizes, subscribes to everything, adjudicates, has a few receptions, at which *I* figure *largely*," she added, her eyes full of mischief. "And thus—you see us."

"Yes, I can see that years have not tamed you."

"I am getting older, Selwyn."

"None of us grow younger," said he coolly.

"Selwyn! allow me to say, you are not improved in your manners. You always were a very rude boy."

"Living so long out of society does not generally have an ingratiating effect. Do you remember my sister, Ellen Maitland?"

"Perfectly!"

"She was in India, but hundreds of miles away from me—her second girl has had jungle fever, and the doctor thought a sea trip, and stay in England, would do her good."

"Where is she now, the child, I mean?"

"At the hotel with me. 'The Langham.'"

"Oh! how dull for the poor thing! Why did you not bring her with you?"

"Edith! Should you think I was taking advantage of our boy and girl friendship,

if I were to ask you to take her in for a time. You see I feel so strange and solitary, I find so many are dead, that at present I seem stranded!" he said with a pathetic break in his voice.

"Selwyn!" said she, putting out her hand, "you silly boy! As if you need ask! I am sure, for her mother's sake, to say nothing of *yours*, sir! she is as welcome as flowers in May. How old is she?"

"Seventeen!"

"And her name?"

"Sabina."

"*What* a pretty, quaint name!"

"She is as quaint in looks as in name—When can she come? Will to-morrow be too soon?"

"Selwyn! suppose I drive to the hotel, this afternoon, and bring her here bag and baggage? Saturday, I go down to Langton with you, sir, and Sabina—so just

get all your business done, ready for me to take you down, both of you. I shall be quite proud of my prizes!"

"But Edward——?"

"Edward, my dear good man! is the Mayor, and I am the Mayoress. Doesn't that convey *anything* to your benighted mind?"

"Yes! A very charming, bewitching woman."

"Very well, then!" said she, with a pretty little blush, "we will have a real old Christmas."

"Ah, Edith! I see your kind warm heart—"

"And my sharp tongue, eh, Selwyn?"

"I used to feel it years ago."

"I will be merciful now. But a truce! Let us bury the hatchet, and have lunch, in the first place, and then I will bring back Sabina and you to dinner—she as a

permanency, and you a sort of irregular—dear old friend."

"God bless you, Edith! You are good, I don't think you can ever realize what it is to have that heart hunger, when you are thousands of miles away from the old home. And with me it has been a perpetual yearning after the unattainable."

She knew what he meant, but she only said simply and kindly: "Indeed, Selwyn, I am *very* glad to see you. I know Edward will be too."

"And I am grateful—It is something to find you well and happy, and not—"

"And not what?" seeing he paused.

"And not married again!"

"Does every woman marry again?"

"Yes generally, I believe, if they get the chance. But it is *you*, individually, that concerns me, not others generally."

"Well I have not married again, and I really have had the chance!" And she looked down, with a demure propriety that was quite neutralised by the wicked little twinkle in her eye. But she gave him no time for reply, for she immediately rang the bell."

"Lunch! Watson."

"For two, Ma'm?"

"Yes, and as quickly as possible; and order the carriage for half-past two."

A very dainty little lunch soon appeared. And after it was over Colonel Luttrell and Mrs. Grantley drove to the "Langham." And there, in one of the private sitting-rooms, looking the picture of forlornness, was a pale sickly-looking girl, thin, sallow, her face only redeemed by a pair of large pathetic dark eyes; her long hair was worn in a pigtail, and it extended more than half her length. She looked about

fifteen. She was warming her thin, delicate hands over the blaze, while her arms were covered with tiny silver bangles, which glistened and flashed in the firelight. Directly she saw her uncle, she flew to him with swift, light step, and threw her arms round his neck.

"Oh, Uncle Selwyn! At last!"

"Sabina, darling, here is a dear friend of mine, and she wants you to come and stay with her."

"Are you coming, too, Uncle?" asked the young lady in no pleased accents.

"I hope, dear, to see a very great deal of your uncle; but I trust, dear, you will learn to love me, because I knew your mother."

"What is your name?" she asked abruptly.

"Edith Grantley."

"I have never heard mother speak of

her," said Sabina, turning her eyes to her uncle.

"Probably not, as Mrs. Grantley, but as Miss Edith Lewis. But now, my dear, you must thank Mrs. Grantley for her kindness. Where is your ayah?"

"There!" and she pointed to a bundle of red and yellow squatted down on a mat at the far end of the room.

He crossed over to the ayah and told her to get her young lady's things together.

"But why can't I stay with you, Uncle?"

"Dear Sabina, do not be unreasonable. *I* feel only too grateful to Mrs. Grantley as it is."

"Selwyn, she will soon get accustomed to me."

"And love you too, Edith," he said, with grateful eyes, for in truth this wayward niece rather troubled him.

"Selwyn" and "Edith" thought the young lady, and a jealous pang crossed her heart. All through the voyage her uncle had been her very own property—her slave, to fetch and carry. And who was this daintily dressed "Edith," whom *her* uncle looked at with looks of reverence, or was it—love?

Mrs. Grantley saw the unfriendly inspection, but she pitied the ill-dressed sickly girl too much to take any heed of it.

"Selwyn, has she any warm clothes or furs? You know she *must* feel the cold so much. Have you, Sabina?"

"No! I have a lot of shawls and wraps. Mother said I could get what I wanted in England."

"Then, to-morrow, suppose we get some new winter clothing? I think you will like that," said Mrs. Grantley, pleasantly.

"Ah do, Edith. Spend as much as you like on my behalf."

The ayah entered with Sabina's hat and cloak; and the Colonel, Mrs. Grantley, the girl and the nurse, drove rapidly back to Cavendish Square.

CHAPTER IV.

The days passed on at Luscombe Manor, and the old baronet slowly progressed; he gained a little strength, and his doctor thought he might live for some time longer.

"I believe, Mr. Lanyon, your presence exercises a most beneficial result—it has brought my patient fresh thoughts, fresh ideas."

"Then, indeed, you give me pleasure by saying so," said the young man heartily.

"Gerald, my dear boy," said Sir Horace one day, "I wish you would marry. Is there any one you fancy?" asked the old man timidly. "I should feel so much obliged. It does not do to wait till one is old. Ah, no! we must grow up with our children."

"Well, uncle Horace," said his nephew cheerily, "I think I can oblige you!"

"I am rejoiced to hear you say so! She is a lady, of course?"

"Essentially so!"

"If she had a little money it would be a great thing. But we must not expect *too* much! Only it would do the estate good, though I have done my best. But still—"

"She *has* wealth, dear uncle!"

"Indeed, is it so? And her name?"

"Hester."

"Hester! Why that was my wife's name! What a happy coincidence! Percival, come here!" And the old man was informed of the joyful intelligence. "We only want my nephew's wife here, eh, Percival?"

"Only that, Sir Horace!"

"Gerald, I think after lunch, if you will come, I should like to go into the picture

gallery. I want to show you one or two portraits."

"I am ready at any time, and should much like to see them again. I was quite a youngster when I saw them last."

After lunch the old baronet was wheeled in his chair to the door of the gallery, and there uncle and nephew were left by Percival for an hour to their own resources.

Gerald pushed the chair where his uncle directed. Several histories were brought to light.

"Who is the unfortunate individual with his face to the wall? for I conclude the reverse side of the canvas represents 'somebody'?"

"It is that disgrace to our name—Sir Walter Lanyon!" said the old man, "I believe there is no crime he did not commit. He pleased neither God nor man."

"Let us look at him!" said Gerald.

Sir Walter was turned round and faced his descendants. A gay, mocking, sensual face; a powdered wig tied with black ribbon, a dark velvet coat and laced cravat. Certainly a handsome face. And the eyes seemed to follow the old baronet with an amused contempt. Anyway it seemed to irritate Sir Horace. "Turn it round, turn it round. I can't bear it."

So Gerald placed the portrait in the same position that he found it. They came at length to two more modern ones, and one of Sir Horace's father. "Do you know these, nephew?"

"Yes; that is *my* father. But the other —surely not my mother?"

"Yes. Ralph and I were both suitors for your mother's hand—and—she chose Ralph. I could not forgive him, for I loved her. See how lovely she was—only eighteen

then! Ah! Lettice! Lettice! It was many years before I married, and the strange thing was that my poor dead boy exactly resembled your father, while you are just what I was. Not handsome, Gerald, none of us Lanyons are that, only here and there. A strange fair divergence comes out. Your father was fair, my boy was fair, and both dead. Can you understand, dear Gerald, why I must have seemed so harsh to you? And your fair young mother died when you were two years old, and your father some years after, and yet I left you, Lettice's son, to struggle on alone. But you will forgive me," said Sir Horace, holding out his thin fragile hands beseechingly.

"Nay, dear uncle, I will only say—for my mother's sake love me. Until these last few months, I have suffered from the utter loneliness of my life, but now it seems as if the gentle winds of Heaven were

blowing upon my garden, sending me its choicest gifts. Let me be to you as a son, and my wife, that is to be, as a daughter, and we will make your old age 'as a lusty winter, frosty but kindly.'"

"Gerald, I ask nothing better, I am only too thankful. Ah! there is my good Percival! He thinks we have been quite long enough."

"Evidently," said Gerald with a smile.

"It is time for your medicine, Sir Horace, and your little nap."

"I thought as much, Percival," said the old man brightly, "but you do look me up, to be sure."

"Aye, sir, I do. Master Gerald's going riding."

"Yes, Uncle Horace! I am going as far as Ilfracombe, on a tour of discovery."

"Ah, do lad. The land wants a master's eye over it."

Gerald Lanyon rode off—his mind full of Hester—for he had that morning received from London the news of Esmé's engagement to Sir Ernest Beldon. He felt how pleasantly everything was working, and there would be no reason for Hester to delay her own marriage, though he concluded she would not become his wife until Esmé was safely and happily done for. What joy these letters of Hester gave him—so true, so loving! How he would cherish her! His own heart was so firm and loyal, it was that love

"Which kindles honour into noble acts."

Then he smiled when he thought over another letter received from his godmother and friend, Lady Louisa Frampton. In it she informed him Lady Laura and Mrs. Cohen had left the cottage and had taken a house in town; and when her year of mourning had expired, Mrs. Cohen was to take Mr.

Vere for better and for worse, and at last Lady Laura had quite made her mind up, and they were all very happy. Then his kind old gossip went on to discuss the subject nearest her own, and his heart, namely, Hester. Yes, he could say with wise old La Bruyere:

"*Etre avec les gens qu'on aime, cela suffit : rêver, leur parler, ne leur parler point, penser à eux, penser à des choses plus indifférentes, mais auprés d'eux tout est égal.*"

Christmas was drawing on apace. Lady Louisa and Hester were both anxious he should spend it with them, but he felt how impossible it would be to leave his uncle, now that the old man's life had become bound up in his own. No! he must look forward to next year. Ah! it was a bright future as far as human plans could be laid, and human foresight arrange, but there *was* something to look forward to, that was the

great thing. And as he rode along on that bright December day, almost in its genial warmth persuading one it was summer, the air was so soft and dewy, and every now and then the blue sea was seen sparkling in the golden sunshine, while the russet browns and the rich madder tones of the fresh turned earth, made the beautiful blue hazy distance delicious, Gerald's heart and Nature were as one.

Although he had been riding for some long time, he was still on his uncle's land, all to be his own one day; and it was with honest pride he looked about him. Already he was known as the "Young Squire," and many a pleasant nod and cheery greeting did he exchange with the country people on the road going and returning. A true Lanyon they thought him.

CHAPTER V.

The gossips of Langton were very much exercised. There was the Mayor's carriage and pair, and there was Miss Higgins' carriage, both awaiting the down train from London. If only Mrs. Grantley and her maid were expected, why had the Mayor's "best" carriage gone to the station? And when Dr. Lewis, quietly riding on his old bay horse, likewise went down to meet the train, their curiosity became excitement—Who could be expected? And at last when the train did arrive, their patience was rewarded, for out stepped Mrs. Grantley, followed by a tall, grey gentleman, a thin young lady, and an object never before seen at Langton—a black creature, dressed in red! A complete heathen! Well, to

be sure! There was the Mayor, almost cuddling the strange grey gentleman, and nobody knew who he was. Miss Higgins and her party were quite overshadowed, by the burning curiosity displayed as to who the black woman could be, and what relation the tall soldier-like man was to anybody. They all got into the large, roomy carriage, and Dr. Lewis rode his own horse, and galloped home, so as to be in readiness to receive the party at his own door. The interested spectators concluded the thin young lady was daughter to the tall gentleman, as she belonged to nobody *they* knew, anyway. It afforded endless speculation. Mrs. Frostick was as eager as anyone to hear every detail which Harriet Brown—having been an eye-witness of the alighting of this distinguished and interesting party—graphically gave her. The dainty-costumed Mrs. Grantley, the pale young lady who

did not look particularly pleased at anything, the black woman with huge earrings, with a red and yellow wrap which folded over her head and wound round her body in some mysterious way, who seemed silent and inscrutable. Then Mrs. Frostick fell to speculating if they had ever heard of any unknown brother or cousin? No, it was all mysterious; so they could only keep a watch on the Mayor's house and await a *dénouement.*

"Miss Higgins and Miss Curtis were met by Sir Ernest Beldon at the station. I wonder if he's going to marry one of yon ladies? He's very keen after one. I should much like to know which of them," said Mrs. Frostick, as she and Harriet Brown sat over a very cosy tea. (This was Harriet's reward for bringing up the interesting news.) Harriet could give no information on this point.

"I thought Mr. Dashwood was going to marry Miss Curtis, Mrs. Frostick."

"Ah! there's no saying—he's one of those close ones."

"It does seem a pity Mr. Lanyon has gone for good, and not married anybody! I can't *think* what all our curates are about."

"All doctors and clergymen should be married," said the second Miss Brown, with thorough conviction in her tone.

"Aye! but they like their wives *young* and rich, my dear; and in these days men can pick and choose. In times gone by the men would look for wives as we used to do for stuffs—see if they would wash and wear. It was—who made the best housekeeper. Now it's all changed, and not for the better, to my mind."

"You know, Mrs. Frostick, the new curate, Mr. Johnson, preaches on Sunday? He got into his lodgings yesterday."

"Humph! I suppose you and Tilly are going to set your caps at him at once?"

"I don't know what you mean, Mrs. Frostick!" said Miss Harriet, tossing her head. "But, as Father is Churchwarden! of course we are bound to show him every civility.

"I dare say!"

Miss Brown thought her hostess was getting personal, so, having finished her tea, rose to take her leave.

"I expect Father will be wanting me, Mrs. Frostick, and Tilly will be crazed to hear all the news, so I think I will say good-bye."

"Good-bye!" said Mrs. Frostick, who, having got all she could in the way of gossip out of Harriet Brown, had no further need of her company.

So Miss Brown the younger retired,

certainly with honours. Ever since Mrs. Frostick's encounter with the keen blade of Mrs. Grantley's superior tactics, the old woman had kept a careful watch over her tongue as regards the party at the Red House. She was second to none in curiosity, but with this curiosity was now mixed discretion (as far as the Mayor's party was concerned), and after Harriet's departure she summoned Betty to clear away the tea-things.

"Betty, you haven't had Keziah up to tea for a long time. When you go 'down Town,' if you see her, ask her up."

"Thankee, mum, I will. When I see her last, which was yesterday, they was all busy at the Mayor's, getting ready for company."

"Who were there, did you hear?"

"I don't know, missus, beyond they was 'company.'"

The aforesaid "Keziah," was a sort of charwoman, who generally helped the servants when Mrs. Grantley had her receptions. So Mrs. Frostick felt she had placed herself in direct communication with occupants of the Red House, and could sleep comfortably on that.

Miss Higgins, after all, changed her mind about spending Christmas in London. She felt it would probably be the last Christmas Esmé and she would spend together, and they both felt they would rather it should be at "The Towers." So they had returned as we know the Saturday before Christmas-day, which would be on the Tuesday. Sir Percy, and Lady Willis, with their only son, were to arrive at Combe Towers on Monday night, and stay over Christmastide. Esmé was very anxious to begin some decorations, "upstairs, and downstairs, and in my lady's chamber." And early Monday

morning, Sir Ernest and she, with the help of Hawkins, made the old house, a very bower of beauty, while Hester drove into Langton, to assist Lady Louisa in their doles to their poorer neighbours. Hester's happiness could never be complete, unless some of her less favoured sisters and brothers shared it. Hers was a large and generous heart, and as, just now, it was full of great happiness, so it expanded —like the ripples, caused by a stone thrown in the water, become larger and larger circles until they are merged in the whole mass of water, so did she; in her endeavour to invest others, with some of the blessings, a bountiful Providence had bestowed on her.

CHAPTER VI.

It was early spring, but yet showing promise of budding leaf and flower, and it was Saint Valentine's Day! It conveyed a good deal to the feminine mind of Langton, not only on account of the saint, but because there was to be a marriage that day at the grand old church; and, next to a good old-fashioned funeral, with feathers and plumes, mutes, and a long line of mourning carriages, and all the appropriate trappings of woe, so dear to the country mind, there is nothing better they like than a wedding. And this was to be a very grand wedding—for everybody who was anybody had been asked.

Mrs. Frostick knew for certain, from

private information received, that the Mayor and Mrs. Grantley, Colonel Luttrell (they had found out all about him and the young lady and the black woman), Lady Laura, Mrs. Cohen, Sir Percy, and Lady Willis were to be there; and then in the evening there was to be a grand gala tea, with magic lantern and other entertainments, all provided at the expense of Miss Higgins, of Combe Towers.

The two Miss Browns were up at cockcrow decorating the church, assisted by Percy Blythe, and were perfectly happy. And very beautiful it looked, for exquisite exotics from the Towers were pressed into the service. It was considered very unfortunate that Mr. Dashwood should have been summoned to his sick mother the very day of the wedding, but in compensation Mr. Lanyon would be present to assist the Rector. It was to be a holiday in the

schools, and as the time drew on the church began to be crowded by interested sight-seers. The first to arrive of the bridal party were the Rectory people—consisting of Lady Laura, who looked regal in her sweeping dark velvet dress, while Pauline Cohen was dainty to a degree in her lovely pearl-colour silk, Lady Louisa contenting herself with dark grey satin and old point lace, but beaming and smiling upon everybody. Then came the Mayor's party, Mrs. Grantley simply perfection in her *eau de Nil* satin and her tall Colonel in attendance, the Mayor keeping well in the background as was his wont. Sabina Maitland was to be one of the bridesmaids with three other young relatives of Sir Ernest. Then came Sir Ernest, the bridegroom, accompanied by his best man, Sir Percy and Lady Willis, and Philip Willis, who seemed much impressed by his new suit of clothes. Then

the excitement increased as the bride's procession entered; Hester with her face so full of tender and earnest emotion, as to be almost beautiful, clad in robes of russet-colour velvet, led by the hand the lovely young bride, in her soft trailing silk and lace, while the young bridesmaids followed behind. There was a hushed feeling of excitement in the church as Gerald Lanyon began the noble office of the ceremony. And it was with a beautiful and stately dignity that Hester gave the child of her heart away, over to the safe keeping of the frank, loyal young baronet. And then the Rector took up the rest of the service in affectionate paternal tones, and the marriage of Esmé Beldon was an accomplished fact. Then, as all the wedding guests left, the bells struck up a merry peal, and the whole party adjourned to the Towers.

Mrs. Frostick quite considered the

"quality" had done their duty to the Town, both in regard to the toilettes of the ladies and the general arrangements for every body. The male portion thought the best treat was the bonnie bride, and the pretty women generally; and opinions ran high between the men as to which was the best looking, Mrs. Grantley or Mrs. Cohen—but they came to the conclusion that the Mayoress was hard to beat.

"Ah! Gerald, but for you how could I part with my darling!" said Hester, as with hands clasped on Gerald's arm, she watched with humid eyes the fast vanishing carriage that contained Sir Ernest and Lady Beldon.

"Sweetheart! Do you know we are anxiously waiting for you at Luscombe! I can't tell you how eagerly my uncle is longing for your presence. We are a confraternity of men! How soon can it be, dearest?"

"Gerald, believe me, directly affairs can be settled. It will be horrible here without Esmé. Though I am glad—so glad, for her sake. I am sure he loves her dearly; but I *shall* miss her."

"I think he is a right down honest fellow," said Mr. Lanyon, heartily.

It was settled that, after her marriage, Hester was to have several of her own servants in her new home, as the staff at Luscombe was very limited. So there was much to be done at the old Manor House. Much renovating within and without. And by-and-by Hester's beautiful treasures were to be brought down to adorn her future home. But before anything as regards themselves could be settled, they both felt the laying of the stone of the new Cottage Hospital must be an accomplished fact, and directly that was done, their own marriage was to take place. So everything was to

be worked up to that point. And they both thought that May would be the most suitable time, and the Rector and Lady Louisa were of that opinion.

The meeting between Mrs. Cohen and her *ci-devant* lover was of the most friendly and prosaic character. They each felt amazed that anything more than pleasant friendship, could possibly have been entertained between them. Pauline thought him grave and severe. He thought her pretty, childish and frivolous. Each was perfectly satisfied with that other partner chosen from their own hearts.

Gerald felt that the woman he had won was far above rubies, and Mrs. Cohen contrasted Mr. Lanyon unfavourably with Charlie Vere. So with this satisfactory basis, Lady Laura was genial; in fact prosperity had warmed her heart. And

the happy affection shown towards her by Pauline had much to do with it, therefore as everybody was satisfied, why should she, Lady Laura, set herself against it all? And Mr. Vere left no stone unturned to win her affection; and she admitted this was perfectly disinterested of him. He was wealthy; he knew Pauline loved him; he had nothing to wish for at Lady Laura's hands, except that she should like him for his own sake, and this was becoming evident.

"Be sure and let me know, Pauline," said her uncle, the Rector, "when you require *my* services."

"Never fear," Uncle Harry, answered that young lady, who was a very great favourite with her uncle, who liked her bright cheerful ways. "I only wish it were to day! It is very hard on Charlie and I, to have to wait when we don't wish

to, but directly we can, settle the day, I will send you a telegram."

"Do my dear, I shall be ready. What do you think of *the* 'affair' to-day, niece?"

"Oh, it was lovely! I think we all looked so nice, too."

"Well, you did, my dear, there is no doubt about it."

"Look! Uncle, there is that naughty boy, Phil Willis, helping himself to champagne; and see, he is filling his pockets with the preserved fruits and his mouth with tartlets. Oh! my dear little boy, I do feel so sorry for you—presently!"

Master Phil, taking advantage of the general emotion, and excitement of the company, and the opportune absence of the servants, was, as Pauline could see through the opened door, regaling himself for the second time that morning. But the

"presently," as Mrs. Cohen wisely anticipated, had already come upon him, his face turned white, then green, and he staggered past them up the stairs to his own domain.

"That's about the best thing he could do, greedy little wretch!"

"I expect it will be about as disagreeable as a first smoke!" said the Rector, with more sympathy—"that is a *very* unpleasant sensation!"

"I have never experienced it—But I *have* tried a cigarette, but it's not worth the fuss they make over it—the women, I mean.

"Uncle! what time is the tea coming off to-night? I always think they are great fun; the amount of liquid those old mothers get through! is amazing! and each child seems on these occasions, to have half-a-dozen mothers!"

"Well, well! My dear it doesn't do to

be *too* particular, and some of these old women have great experience in tea galas! They go to Dissenters, and all sorts of sects, so of course they are able to compare notes, and I must admit there is a good deal of competition. I believe ours, generally, do give satisfaction! I think your aunt makes her teas a speciality, rather hard to beat in the opposition camp!"

"I wonder if they are grateful for it all?"

"I do not know about 'gratitude' they *expect* it anyway! Yes! on the whole I think it *is* a good thing, it humanises them and brings the classes together. I am sure I do not know how many are coming to-night, because Miss Higgins has given *carte blanche* to your Aunt. And that means a very great deal of latitude. Trust Louisa, for cramming the place with all the waifs and strays she can lay her hands upon. I

do not mind, I am not responsible for the funds!" chuckled the Rector.

Mrs. Frostick was quite in her glory. Lady Louisa had deputed to her a large share of the "catering" for this particular festivity. Once more she was occupying her proper position in "Society!" and it was a balm to her wounded pride.

Among all the *dramatis personæ* of the wedding, there was one individual who felt sick and sorry. And that was Percy Blythe. The presence of Colonel Luttrell, was a bitter pain to his heart, because he too loved Mrs. Grantley, but it was a love borne silently, and he knew it was a love that would never be reciprocated. As long as no other man gained her heart, he could bear it, and bask in the pleasures of her friendship. He could not even say she showed any particular love for the Colonel.

Only he could see the Colonel did for her. He appropriated her, as it were! that was it. Mrs. Grantley, with rare instinct, knew what was passing in the younger man's heart, and tried in her bright pleasant fashion to soften the blow, but her kindness only made it the worse. Whatever she did increased his hopeless love.

"I wish he would fall in love with Sabina!" thought Mrs. Grantley, but Sabina was not an easy person to fall in or out with! She had an unpleasant way of putting very pertinent questions. In appearance, she was very much improved, these last two or three months—her face was rounder, her figure a little fuller, but she was still a slender dark-eyed girl. She had become "accustomed" to Mrs. Grantley, but the love her uncle hoped for, had not come. Now, Sabina *had* taken a fancy to Mr. Blythe, though no

one was aware of it. And it annoyed her to see the dreamy sad look in his blue eyes. She was watching him to-night. As he watched—Mrs. Grantley, flitting about, and her bright happy laugh—came over to where he stood.

"Why are you looking so dismal, Mr. Blythe?" asked a voice at his elbow. "I fear the wedding hasn't agreed with you any better than it did with little Philip Willis."

"Did it not agree with him, Miss Maitland?"

"No; he ate and drank too much, and made himself ill."

"Well! I was not guilty of *that!*"

"No; but something disagrees with you, and I think I can guess it."

"I think not, Miss Sabina," he answered coldly, while a hot flush passed over his face.

"Yes! You have to take in a rather large dose of Uncle Selwyn, and it does not agree with you!"

"I do not understand you, Miss Maitland!" He was angered that this child should so read his thoughts.

"Oh yes, you do! I, too, have felt just as angry—you know Uncle Selwyn was my very own, but she has taken him away."

"I think we have no right to discuss Mrs. Grantley in this fashion," he replied with some sternness.

Miss Maitland paid no attention whatever to his observation, but continued in precisely the same voice—"There is just this one thing to be said for her. She was engaged to him—or something like it—years ago, and he has waited for her all this time."

"Is that so?" asked Mr. Blythe with painful eagerness.

Sabina was rather pleased to discover she could thus move her auditor.

"Yes! He worships her! I don't know that she cares so much for him. I do not believe she cares for anybody but herself."

"I will not hear a word against her," exclaimed the young man passionately.

Sabina looked coldly at him, and a look of contempt passed over her face at such weakness.

"Do you think it will do *you* any good to go on loving her?—it is like a child crying for the moon!"

"I shall always love her!" and with that he turned on his heel.

Her dark eyes flashed a look after him as he moved away among the throng and carefully avoided his tormentor for the rest of the evening. But his heart felt like lead.

"You look tired to night, Mr. Blythe,"

said Mrs. Grantley, coming to where he stood. "Let us sit down for a few moments."

"*I am* rather tired, I was up very early this morning So I am going to ask the Rector to let me off a little to-night. Johnson can take my place for the remainder of the evening."

"Perhaps it will be best," said she simply. "We cannot always get what we want in this world."

"No," he answered in sad tones.

"Good night, Percy, and God bless you!" and she held out her hand in frank kindness. He grasped it with strong, almost unconscious pressure. Then seizing young Johnson, who was passing, he whispered a few words and hurriedly left the hall.

He swiftly made his way down the silent moonlit street to his own unpretending

lodging. He let himself in. All the small household were just where he had come from—the Town Hall. He pulled a chair to the table and threw himself into it, and presently he laid his head on the table and wept his heart out. It was no disgrace to his manhood—no one saw him—it was the pent-up misery of months of hopeless fighting against stern facts and logic. He *knew*, he felt, the very first time his eyes fell on Colonel Luttrell, his fate, hitherto perhaps in the balance, was sealed. And that child with cruel fingers had torn the wound, so that to-night, he could not bear it.

"God bless you! God bless you! my darling; may you have every happiness, though I may not share it. No wonder he has waited! She is worth the waiting for; and he is worthy of her." Yes, in the midst of his own bitter grief he could still do his rival justice.

Then he though he would get a curacy elsewhere. But would it be fair to the kind old Rector, who was very fond of him, and detested changes? Lanyon had gone, and no one knew what Dashwood would do. No! he must stay on and fight his battle manfully. He felt relieved by his tears, and determined to take a stroll in the clear moonlight. He walked out towards the country, and after an hour or two returned, tired, but refreshed in mind, and able to enjoy the frugal supper prepared by his landlady.

"It was a pity you left so soon, sir! Everybody was asking for you. Mrs. Grantley told them you felt very tired."

"Which was quite true, Mrs. Fisher, and I had a headache as well, so I thought a good walk was the thing."

"Well, sir, if you're better is the main thing."

"Thanks, I am, and ready for my supper."

"Aye, that's a good sign! As long as folks eat, drink, and sleep well, there isn't much amiss with them!"

CHAPTER VII.

May had come at last! the very birthday of the world! so joyous, so dainty, so rich with bud and blossom, the air laden with sweetness of perfume, hills and dales still covered with yellow cowslip, and once more Langton was *en fête*. The foundation stone of the cottage hospital was to be laid that day by the Lord Lieutenant of the county, one or two Members of Parliament were to be at the ceremony, flags were flying, there was to be a grand lunch at the Town Hall, when there would be speeches. The townspeople had taken up the scheme more warmly than could have been expected, and Miss Higgins' generous example had been followed by high and low, according to their abilities. Everyone was in good

humour, for any change from the quiet monotony of country life is appreciated and made the most of. Not that they object to the monotony—which is the normal state of affairs, but they are ready to welcome any little excitement that comes in their way.

There is no need to describe this particular *fête*. Everyone knows them so well. Everyone says something pleasant of each other. The two members being on the Government side, just say a few words against the opposition, but praise for the "loyal town of Langton" was the order of the day. The Lord Lieutenant smiled affably upon everybody, and was thankful, when he was at liberty to return to his ancestral halls.

The townspeople having paid for their lunch, thoroughly enjoyed it; in fact, everybody was satisfied.

This was Hester's last appearance as Miss Higgins, though Langton was unconscious of that fact, for early the next morning she was to be married by license, so that the good folks of Langton had even been defrauded of hearing her banns called out! To this day, they talk of the gay wedding of Sir Ernest and Lady Beldon, as if it had been entirely got up for their special edification. And as for Miss Higgins, she was looked upon as a confirmed old maid, and a person never likely to tempt matrimony.

No suspicion was raised at Mr. Lanyon again appearing before them. Did not he and Miss Higgins work their hardest over the hospital scheme? And there never would be a more generous woman than the owner of Combe Towers. So the grand day was over, and Hester was to stay all night at the Rectory, and Gerald with Dr. Lewis. Mrs. Grantley and Sabina came down from

town, only for the ceremony of the foundation stone, and returned the same evening.

The sun rose in all its splendour, flooding the church with light—as Lady Louisa, Gerald, and the Rector, and Dr. Lewis walked in at eight o'clock. Again the Rector read the service, and in the quietest manner possible, Gerald Lanyon and Hester Higgins were made man and wife. The sun poured his beams upon Hester's earnest face, and Gerald's, so full of love—on Lady Louisa's happy satisfied countenance, despite something like a tear lurking in the corner of her eyes.

They silently left by the vestry door, just as the early congregation were beginning to file in as the bell summoned them to mattins. Once more the Rector, Lady Louisa, Dr. Lewis and the newly-married pair drove to Combe Towers, where Lady Louisa played the part of hostess. The old

house hardly wore its wonted look, for so many lovely things and pictures were to be conveyed down to Luscombe Manor. All her own personal belongings, her horses and dogs, many of her servants had already departed, so that it seemed as if its gentle owner must perforce follow them.

They were only going to allow themselves a week at the Isle of Wight, and then they would take up their residence at Luscombe.

"Ah, my dear," said Lady Louisa, "I am the one to be pitied! What *shall* I do when you are both gone?"

"Come and stay with us, dearest friend, and bring the Rector."

"That is easier said than done, but I must try."

At last the hour came for their departure. And as the carriage waited at the door to convey them to the station Hester made a little tour of farewell through her desolate

rooms. Into Esmé's empty chamber, which was still as the young girl had left it three months ago. Old Major followed her about with sad pathetic eyes—those faithful friends of ours—with their dumb voices, have a wonderful sensitive sympathy! He knew full well something, was disturbing his generally quiet mistress. And our surroundings! *how* we cling to them! They, too, in their way are silent friends. That chair, hallowed by Memory, almost seems to speak. It knows all—our very thoughts. The familiar arrangement of our possessions —how part and parcel they are of our very self! Hester felt all this, and felt it deeply; but yet she knew by the exchange she would be the gainer. It was not lightly that she gave away her liberty. Then she stooped down and kissed old Major, and he felt a tear or two, and he licked her face. "Only for a week, Major, and we shall meet again."

Then she walked down the broad staircase, past the Egyptian girl, still holding her lamp, Major following with infinite dignity beside her.

"Ah, my love, it distresses you to leave your home," said Gerald, hastening to meet her. "I do not wonder."

"No, dear, not 'distresses me,' only a little sad feeling at the uncomfortable state of 'my Lares and Penates.' We *do* cling to our household gods!"

"May you say that in another three months in your new home!"

"I am *sure* of that," said she, smiling through her tears. "All the more, dearest of friends, if you will only make haste and come."

And with this she placed her arms round Lady Louisa, and lovingly kissed her. Quickly the warm adieus were made to the Rector, Dr. Lewis and the old housekeeper

and butler—all that were left of the once large household, who had gone on before, even to Justine, and these were to follow as soon as possible.

Gerald hurried his wife into the carriage, for he saw she could not bear much more. And again the comforting feeling of his strength and force of power—the staff, in fact—which she had promised herself, and which she knew by instinctive intuition, would never bend, or bruise her hand.

Major looked after the carriage with sad wistful eyes, and Lady Louisa had tears in hers. She fondled the old dog, who gratefully licked her hand, and then the Rector, Dr. Lewis and Lady Louisa departed, and the remaining servants hastened their arrangements, and old Major wandered about disconsolately into the deserted rooms, first into Esmé's, the loved young companion of his gambols, and then into his

mistress's, where he threw himself down in weary abandon at the foot of her chair. It passed his comprehension, only he felt in his canine way the happiness was gone out of his life.

Saturday morning. Mrs. Frostick spectacles on nose, was opening her weekly paper, the orthodox Conservative and Clerical paper, and, of course, like all other methodical women, she began at the births, and read them through carefully, commenting favourably or unfavourably, as the case might be, on the young lives just lanched on the sea of life. Then she came to the marriages.

"Good powers alive! Here, Betty, come here!"

Betty came from some back regions, her great thick apron full of potatoes, in their various stages of peeling, knife in hand.

"What is it, missus?"

"What is it? Why, this. 'May 2nd, at the Parish Church, Langton, by the Rev. the Rector, Canon of Oswaldminster, the Rev. Gerald Lanyon, nephew of Sir Horace Lanyon, Bart., of Luscombe Manor, in the County of Devon, to Hester, daughter of the late Dr. Higgins, of Combe Towers.'

"What do you think of that, Betty?"

"It's just the most surprising thing I ever heard on."

"No banns or nothing!" murmured Mrs. Frostick. "It does beat all."

She put a shawl over her head and flew down the street, into the Browns', paper in hand.

"Have you seen *this*, David Brown?"

"Seen what, neighbour Frostick?"

"Why, Mr. Lanyon's marriage with Miss Higgins."

"You don't say so!" said the old man, heartily. "Why, that's real good news.

There's goodness and loving-kindness matched, and no mistake. Well, I am pleased—real pleased."

"But, Father! they have had no wedding, or nothing, it's all so sudden like."

"Never you mind, lass, it isn't always the greatest fuss makes the happiest marriage. Both them two, are as humble-minded as—as"—he might have said of himself—but he scratched his scanty old ocks to find a simile!" "as Lady Louisa—you can't beat that!"

"We are not even thinking of Lady Louisa," said Mrs. Frostick, shortly.

"May be not!" said the old man in a satisfied tone of voice. "But if there are four people I love, it's these two," (tapping the paper with his horned rimmed spectacles) and "my Lady, and bonnie Mrs. Grantley.

"Lord save us, David Brown! You fix

well on to the quality," said Mrs. Frostick, shaking herself with offended dignity. "What do they think of you in return?"

"That's not for me to say, neighbour! They are always uncommon kind you know—it's just 'Mr. Brown this, Mr. Brown that!' Why, neighbour Frostick, if I was sick like, there wouldn't be a tenderer body than you," said the old man with sly propitiation.

"No!" said the widow Frostick, softening. "If you were ill—Brown—you might always count on me."

"Where have the new married couple gone to?" asked Harriet.

Now this simple question did vex Mrs. Frostick. She absolutely did not know.

"Oh, I suppose to foreign parts. All married people go there. Sir Ernest and Lady Beldon did."

"It doesn't seem to matter *where* they

go, so long as they're married. Ah! she's a good woman, and the likes of them are gifts from the Lord. My Nancy was one of that sort," said old Mr. Brown.

Mrs. Frostick pursed up her lips; *that* theme was most uncongenial to her. In *her* young days she had in the ordinary course of life hoped to have become Mrs. David Brown, but this said Nancy stepped into her shoes before she could realise the fact.

No! She did not wish to hear anything of Nancy Brown, deceased.

Matilda Brown, looking thinner and more lanky than ever, was pensively wondering as to what dress Miss Higgins was married in, and when she would return to the Towers.

Harriet was a little more sprightly; she thought she had made some slight impression on the new curate, who was rather

"raw" and somewhat shy, while the hearty welcome given him by old David Brown had cheered him not a little.

There was another person equally taken by surprise, and that was the Rev. Cyril Dashwood. And to think Lanyon was the possessor of the heiress after all! It was not the woman Mr. Dashwood cared for in the least—the only woman he would probably ever love would be Esmé—no! it was her fortune. Oh, what would he not have done with *that!* The position he would have climbed to! He gnashed his teeth with impotent rage. Lanyon, who had everything—position, birth, wealth, heir to a fine estate. He cursed fortune, who had behaved so scurvily to him. And here he was, tied by the leg! He found the town and place hateful; but it was no use quarrelling with one's bread. No! he must remain on, till something

turned up! Meantime he became more austere, more reserved, and almost hating the fair sex, as much as Mr. Lanyon once had done before him.

Poor Percy Blythe in his way was equally depressed. When Mrs. Grantley was in Langton, Colonel Luttrell was nearly sure to be, and that of itself was a source of pain. When she was absent there was a blank, which nothing could fill. No, it was all dark and dreary—a grey, unlovely road, which he felt he must traverse alone. Lately she had been much in town. Sabina was having some finishing lessons, and both were going about a good deal. When the London season does begin, it keeps the votaries of pleasure well employed, and not only in pleasure, but in intellectual pursuits. And Mrs. Grantley was a woman who made the most of these in every way. Sabina also

enjoyed the great city at its brightest and gayest.

"Mrs. Grantley," said she one morning, "why can't you ask Mr. Blythe up here for a week? I should like him, at any rate."

"I have never thought of it. He always seems such a part and parcel of the Langton home. But, Sabina, do you really mean to say you would like him here?"

"Yes, I do."

"Well, we will ask him—if the Rector can spare him."

Sabina went over to where the elder lady sat and kissed her—the first deliberate kiss she had ever given her.

"Thank you, Mrs. Grantley."

"I did not fancy, Sabina, that Mr. Blythe and you got on too well."

"No, we do not," said the young lady, candidly. "I like him, and he does not like me."

"But perhaps he won't care about it," said Mrs. Grantley, thoughtfully.

"Never mind about him caring or not, *I* like it," said the young autocrat, drawing her delicate dark brows into a line, not pleasant to see. "Besides! I don't see *why* you should always consult the male part of humanity. They don't think a bit the more of you, or put themselves out of the way."

"One cannot always study one's self, Sabina!'"

"I do not see, why not? I always do so!"

"My dear, you do now, because you are young, and, like all Indian children, you have been spoilt. But believe me, Sabina, selfishness is not a lovely trait, or one that makes a woman beloved individually, or charming generally!"

"Perhaps not, but it's very comfort-

able to do as you like, without any bother."

"What is that, that is so 'comfortable' Sabina?" said her uncle, who was just announced.

"Only to do as one likes, Uncle Selwyn."

"Lawful but not expedient."

Then he turned to Mrs. Grantley. "I have some tickets for 'the Horticultural this afternoon—Will you come?"

"Most certainly, and with pleasure!—Shall we get dressed now?"

"I think so, the afternoon is so lovely."

"Uncle, what night are we going to see 'Madame Angot'?"

"To-morrow! Miss Impatience."

"How delicious!"

CHAPTER VIII.

PERCY BLYTHE was busy over his sermon; trying to strengthen his heart by working his mental powers to their fullest—when that rather important factor in our hopes and disappointments in life, the postman, brought a letter—it ran thus:

"Cavendish Square, May 10th.

"MY DEAR MR. BLYTHE,

"It will give Miss Maitland and myself great pleasure, if you can get the Rector to give you a week's leave, and come up to town and spend it with us. We are leading most dissipated lives! And propose to drag you into the vortex! Come at once, if you can.—Your sincere friend, "EDITH GRANTLEY.

"Kindest regards at the Rectory."

He rose excitedly, and kissed the letter. Sermon and all good resolves were thrown to the winds. He would have one taste of the intoxicating draught, even if hampered with the objectionable Sabina and the existence of Colonel Luttrell. He would be near *her*, that was the point. He seized his hat, and almost ran down to the Rectory; fortunately the Rector was in.

He gave the Rector his letter to read, almost jealously; but still he thought his chief might be mollified, for he was a little testy sometimes about small things, and he never liked Percy to be long away from him.

"Well, well I suppose you must go. There is no getting over Mrs. Grantley's coaxing!"

"I should like to be going myself" said Lady Louisa. "We shall have to go, by-and-by, Harry, because I have

promised Adolphus to take him *everywhere!*"

"A rash promise, Louisa," replied the Rector, who knew from experience the life his Etonian son was likely to lead them.

"The poor boy works so hard, he requires relaxation," answered his mother affectionately.

I do not know how it was, but the eyes of the Rector and his senior curate met, with precisely the same smile, that of incredulity. For it was notorious that Master Adolphus Frampton's life at Eton College, was the reverse of studious, and it was only a delusion of his fond mother to imagine it.

"Well, Blythe! You must arrange with Johnson to take your work. He always seems so dense about everything! Make it clear if you can."

"No, sir, I don't think he is dense, he is nervous."

Well, it's just as disagreeable."

"I will see him, and put everything all right."

"Good bye then, Percy. Say good-bye to him now, Louisa, it will save time. He might get off by the 10.15 train, it's only nine now."

"*Thanks*, dear Rector," said Blythe, heartily grasping their hands. And he rushed off in search of the new junior curate. He found him discussing his modest breakfast.

"Here, Johnson, is a chance to distinguish yourself. I am going up to town by the 10.15 train, so you will have to take my duty to-night, the Thursday evening lecture."

"But," said the other, horror-struck, "I have no sermon ready, and it takes me nearly a week to write one."

"Never mind," said Blythe, airily, "I will lend you *mine*. It's about my best; it isn't quite finished, it's on 'Predestination.'"

"Oh, Lord! That's a subject I have never tackled. What an unpleasant state of affairs!"

"Never mind, old fellow," said Percy, giving him a hearty slap on the back. "You have never had the honour of preaching on the Thursday evenings. It will be a good introduction, especially with my sermon, and you can wind it up with your own ideas. I have arranged other parochial matters at my lodgings."

Mr. Johnson did not seem in the least consoled, on the contrary, he looked very miserable.

"Here's the sermon, old chap, and adieu!" And Percy, throwing down the MS., quickly left the unfortunate man placing his

spectacles on his nose, and beginning his punishment forthwith.

Mrs. Fisher was a good-natured old body. So with her valuable help, his scattered belongings were neatly packed in a portmanteau, and a few small arrangements of his own rapidly completed. He was just in time to send a telegram to Mrs. Grantley; and, as he was getting into the train, the Rectory page-boy put a letter in his hand.

"From the Rector, sir," said he, touching his cap. And the train carried Percy out of his sight.

Mr. Blythe opened the note anxiously.

"Dear Blythe,—There is nothing like having plenty of money in your pocket, and no place like London for melting it. Accept the enclosed with our hearty wishes.

"Harry Frampton."

Four five-pound notes! The tears almost came into his eyes. So generous and delicate. They would guess his purse would be but slender. Needless to say, his spirits went up at a bound. And at King's Cross there was Mrs. Grantley's dainty brougham, with its charming owner inside, and, to Percy's great delight—no Sabina!

"Sabina had an engagement, or she would have come too."

"I am quite as pleased as it is, Mrs. Grantley."

"Isn't that just a bit uncomplimentary to that young lady?"

"Probably, but it is the truth."

When Mr. Johnson got into the pulpit to preach on Thursday night—greatly to the surprise of the congregation—they *were* still more surprised at the sermon! Surely the words were the words of Mr. Blythe

(for his style was very familiar), and the manner of uttering them Mr. Johnson's own, which was nervous, and at times almost incoherent. And the fag-end of the sermon, which *was* his own composition, expressed his great relief at having got rid of the first portion. The Rector stared in amazement (from the chancel stalls), and then gave way for a moment to a broad smile, but he drew himself smartly up at "attention," and resumed his severe inspection of the nervous, agitated Mr. Johnson, who came down the pulpit-stairs, mopping his face, but otherwise relieved.

"May I ask, Mr. Johnson, if *that*—ahem! —*sermon* is an original composition?" enquired the Rector, ironically.

"It was partly my own, sir, and partly Mr. Blythe's."

"Ah! I thought it a *very* peculiar jumble! For the future, sir, I would suggest the

compsoition of your sermons should be made by yourself. Good evening!" and the Rector retired from the vestry, leaving the discomfited Mr. Johnson in a very unhappy state.

"You made rather a mess of that," said Mr. Dashwood, very much in the tone of Job's friends.

"I know, too well! But what was a fellow to do at a few hours' notice? I haven't got any old sermons by me. I have not been ordained six months. And Blythe turned up all in a hurry this morning with half a sermon, and told me to finish it how I liked. A most unpleasant situation!"

"I should advise you to study up a bit before you venture on another Thursday evening!" said the second curate, with a cold unsympathetic smile, and he too left.

So the unlucky Mr. Johnson, his freckled face still flushed, took off his cassock with limp fingers, and even the old parish clerk looked severely on him, so that it was with feelings of real gratitude that he reciprocated Miss Harriet Brown's warm pressure of the hand, when she informed him her father wished to see him on his way home from church.

"With the greatest of pleasure!"

"Father couldn't get to church to-night, Mr. Johnson. So he hopes you will stay and have a bit of supper with us."

"I think it very kind of him asking me," said he, gratefully.

So they wended their way—he comforted, and she very pleased. It began to look like business, she thought. But Harriet had learned wisdom in repeated failures. She kept silence as to her own affairs. There is nothing like publicity for nipping a

flickering affection in the bud, above all in country towns, where the inhabitants—like the Athenians of old—spend much of their time in "telling or hearing some new thing."

CHAPTER IX.

It was a perfect day. The sky was blue as a turquoise. Every hill and dale was clothed with the most exquisite tints of spring, from pale primrose to deep citron, all fresh and fair in their new birth, while every tree was laden with blossom, sending forth from their woodland home dainty bouquets of Nature's own perfume. And at Luscombe Manor it was hailed with gladness, for it was the home-coming of the young Squire and his Bride.

Under the skilful and experienced hands of Hester's servants, her apartment already had that air of comfort and elegance peculiar to well appointed English homes. All her cherished possessions—her 'household gods'—were arranged in suitable

positions. Old Major was gradually making friends with Prince and Rupert, but generally kept to his mistress's apartments, for he felt sure, by instinct, that where Justine was, there would his mistress be, and he was pleased, on personal investigation of each individual article, to find that they were old friends.

Old Sir Horace was as nearly happy as possible, in his wheeled chair, attended by Percival. He visited the arrangements progressing two or three times a day, and watched with unflagging interest every beautiful picture, plaque or bronze, as they emerged from their packing-cases and were placed into position, and when everything was completed, to the vases of flowers and lovely plants, he was delighted. "Ah, Percival! your new lady must be a wonderful woman, or her servants would not be so perfect in their work. Servants always

reflect the character of their masters and mistresses."

"I believe they do, Sir Horace. It's living with them day by day as does it. If there's real friendship between masters and servants there's love in the work, sir, that's it; it isn't all time-serving; there's a real spurt in it."

"Quite true, Percival! If I was a poor penniless old cripple you would stick to me to the last?"

"Aye, sir! that I would," said the man in solemn tones, as the tear came into his eye.

"Percival! what do you mean by having the dismals such a day as this? when we ought to be as bright as the sunshine! Come, turn about, and let us see my nephew's rooms—how they look. And hark you! just ring and order a bumper of that good old port."

"*But, sir!* I don't think you must have it!"

"And pray, *sir*, who said I was going to have it? Ring the bell."

And when some wine was brought in a silver goblet Sir Horace took it in his hand, and holding it towards the old servant said, "Now, Percival, you will please to drink to the health of Mr. and Mrs. Gerald Lanyon, and that you and I may be spared many years to witness their happiness, and fresh young branches to the old stem of the house of Lanyon! Drink, sir!" And old Percival drank as his master directed, and his heart was warmed, and cheered and his spirits refreshed.

"Sir, perhaps a very small wine glass would not hurt you on this auspicious occasion!" said Percival, relenting.

"I don't think it will at all! Anyway, if it does, I shall always blame you for it, Percival."

"Certainly, sir!" And so a wine glass of the rare old wine was sipped by the old baronet, while Percival watched anxiously to see if any bad results came from this unusual dissipation, but none appeared, and Sir Horace seemed to enjoy it.

"Percival! as I cannot unfortunately go to meet my nephew and his wife, you will go as my representative. What sort of a person do you consider my niece's coachman—Charles?"

"A very affable person, Sir Horace."

"Oh!" said the baronet, with an unusual twinkle in his eye. "An 'affable person'; I am very glad I am sure to hear it. Well, then, you will sit beside this affable person."

"But, sir! How can I leave you all

those hours?" exclaimed Percival, in horrified tones.

"Nonsense! send one of the maids to look after me."

Poor old Percival was full of anxiety, he trusted no maids with his precious master; and yet he dared not disobey. So he was fain to find out the most likely of the female servants and thoroughly drill her into the important custody of the master for three mortal hours.

"Lor', Mr. Percival! As if it wasn't women's calling to nurse folks!"

"You will please not talk too much; Sir Horace objects to any chatter," said Mr. Percival, severely.

To this she vouchsafed no reply, for when her turn came to wait on the old baronet, she chatted considerably, and posted her master well up in every scrap of local news, and interested him so much

that the time flew, and he was amazed to find the hour was due for the travellers to arrive! And presently the shouts which could be heard drew nearer and nearer. Sir Horace had his chair drawn up to the great entrance hall, the massive old doors were thrown wide open, and in a few moments a most animated group were at the broad steps. The open carriage containing Mr. and Mrs. Lanyon was a mass of flowers, from humble childish offerings to bouquets of larger ambition. The tenantry were mounted, having escorted the young Squire and his lady to their home. They watched with affectionate interest the old Baronet's reception of his new niece—how warmly he grasped her hands, and drew her face down to his, and how gently and graciously she embraced the old man! Then they set up a hearty cheer for the Squire and Mrs. Lanyon, and some ringing

cheers for Sir Horace Lanyon; and the Baronet had his chair wheeled to the terrace, and in his weak, thin voice thanked them for their kind loyalty to the house of Lanyon. Then Percival came and took his master away; after which Gerald thanked them in the name of his wife and himself, and the family were left to themselves. As for old Major's boundless delight, it can scarcely be described. Hester was gratified at her own especial apartments, at the position of the rooms, which were beautiful; the windows, which were large casements and built out in a bay form, from which a great expanse of view of hill and dale and sea, could be seen. The lovely mossy lawns, the distant trees, while every sort of flower seemed to give her welcome. Outside the window the syringa was asserting itself both by its lovely perfume and blossoms. Then she

examined the inside of her domain; there were all her old favourite pictures, her especial chair, with its fur covering, her japanese screen, lined with pale yellow brocade, all her possessions being heightened by the handsome carved oak panelling.

"Is Madame satisfied," said Justine, with affectionate anxiety.

"Indeed, Justine, I *do* think it perfect! Thank you, so much, and the others too."

"The old Sir Horace, Madam, has been here twice a day to see how we get on."

"Well, sweetheart!" how do you like all the arrangements which my dear old uncle and Justine seem to have managed between them?" said Mr. Lanyon, entering.

"I am perfectly in love with everything, and cannot feel sufficiently grateful to everyone."

Then Justine left to prepare her mistress change of toilette. And Gerald, putting his arm round his wife's shoulder, drew her to the window. "Welcome to your new home, a thousand times welcome! Will it please you, my Portia?"

"Ah, Gerald! I cannot express my feelings; I only know I am unutterably happy, and it has all come through you," and she put her hands up to his face and then kissed him. "But Gerald, love! in our happiness we must not forget your dear old uncle, his delicate white face went straight to my heart; we must be very good to him by reason of our great love, and pay him back in every devotion for the loss of all he loved."

"We will, indeed! But now, wife, be ready in half-an-hour, because we dine at very primitive hours—six o'clock!—on account of Sir Horace, who retires

generally to his own apartments after that meal."

So Hester passed up the large open flight of stairs to the gallery beyond, which ran round, and as she ascended the staircase she was struck with the large hall below, which might hold two hundred people. "What a good place for 'Penny Readings,' and this gallery might be utilised for extra pressure!" Her face broke out into a smile as these thoughts flitted through her mind. But it did not prevent her hastily completing her toilet, and being perfectly ready, when her husband came to conduct her to the large old dining-room, where Sir Horace was already seated.

"My dear niece, you *will* excuse an old man being seated before you, though that could not be used as a plea; but my last illness has left me very shaky on my legs,

and Percival here will insist upon my being comfortably placed first of all, so you must excuse us both."

"Dear uncle Horace, you must not treat your niece as if she were a stranger—so please withdraw your apology." Then, as servants were present, only ordinary subjects were discussed. But they were very happy—probably it was one of the happiest days Sir Horace had spent for years. He seemed to forget all the past in the present. Once more he saw at his table a younger scion of the old House and a gracious woman, for, with the intuition which some natures possess, he read the new chatelaine's character—good and true to the core. After the dinner he retired, not because he was so much tired, though he was to a certain extent, but his happiness brought him almost near to tears—as it does to some natures, whose organisation

is emotional, and have been tried in the furnace of suffering.

As the days wore on Sir Horace Lanyon was more often to be found in the rooms especially devoted to Hester. Here she would play the piano to him, read to him. His chair would be beside hers on small sketching expeditions. She often drove him out in her low pony phaeton, while the three dogs would generally bear them company. Gerald meanwhile taking all the burden of managing the estate off his Uncle's hands. Sir Horace seemed to have revived wonderfully in the sweet and gentle presence of Hester, so truly a woman, so perfect a mistress. The household, somewhat rough and neglected hitherto, moved upon wheels, and was as perfect in its appointments as "Combe Towers" had been. The old gardens were once more restored to their first estate. The hitherto

closed rooms were radiant with sunshine, swept, garnished, renovated and refurnished. With all this her large heart and ample means were still anxious to do some service to those who had none to help them.

They often now adjourned to her sitting-room after dinner, and this evening it was delicious. The large casements were set wide open; the evening sun was casting lovely glows everywhere; far out beyond, the sea looked so blue as to be nearly purple. The views as they met the eye seemed one long exquisite panorama: the blue distance, with its delicate haze; the trees so far off that they seemed to melt into a purple sea of hills and dales; while the sky, with beautiful opal tints, intensified itself as the sun sank grandly behind the distant hills, leaving his track in rosy cloudlets and pearly hues. Then the sea

took up its rose tints, and it deepened into stronger shadows; and the small white sails flitting about on the distant waters looked like spirits. Hester sat silently watching this beautiful scene. Her own face and form, with its full, grand outlines, no unworthy spectator. Both the men were gazing at her. With the same rosy flush from the fast departing sun on her face, as she was intent on the external world, she was thinking over some problem in her own mind, for her eyes had a far-seeing look in them. She saw the beautiful world outside, and yet her thoughts travelled beyond that.

"Well, wife. And the result?"

"The Result? Of What?" said she, turning the grey eyes round to her husband.

"Of your thoughts, sweetheart! Uncle

Horace and I have been waiting patiently this last half-hour. Will it please you, speak?"

"Dear Gerald, I was thinking at that moment, how much I should like to bring some of that exquisite picture into some of those terrible back slums in London, where they hardly even see the sky! To think! we have—all—and they—none."

"Those are causes and effects too deep for us, dear," said Gerald, gently.

"Perhaps so. But still I think we might do a little, even only a little. They, perhaps, would care less about this beautiful picture; but would appreciate little comforts, little necessaries, even as I do this setting sun and those distant hills. Gerald, I have been thinking. I should like to find out some good woman—a second 'Sister Dora'—who would try and work in one or two of those fearful courts,

as *my* work seems cut out for me, in life, in looking after you two dear ones, and receiving all your love," said she, with affection.

"Most certainly!" the two gentlemen exclaimed emphatically.

"Well, let me finish! If I can find this noble woman, who could and would do this work, I could find a certain amount of funds to place at her disposal. You would not object dear Gerald?" And she rose and laid her hand on her husband's shoulder.

"Object, sweetheart! God forbid! it is your own, to do what you will with."

"I think dear niece, we shall require another Solomon to extol you."

"Nay Uncle Horace—the love of you two is sufficient reward."

"Settle it as you think best, Hester!"

"Thanks, Gerald. You are always good."

"I have often wished our Police Magistrates had discretionary sums of money voted, so that they might dispense their alms as wisely, and as patiently, as they do their advice, or their justice."

"They do do that very often," said Sir Horace.

"Yes," said Mrs. Lanyon, "but only in a fitful way—that is, when they have it in the poor-box. But see how wisely it is administered. If it is a doubtful case, the magistrate often sends an officer from the Court to make inquiries; if it is an honest story, the relief according to the circumstance, comes *at once*. They don't postpone the charity till it is cold. And how can we say how many lives it has saved from starvation, or death? Oh! I am sure

they ought to have money at their command."

"Yes, but you see, Hester, the magistrate's function is to dispense justice—not alms. The time would be taken up with hungry claimants."

"All the same, Gerald, the alms might wait upon justice."

"Well, love, I will not dispute your theory, you can carry out your own argument by sending some money, which I daresay, will be received with thanks. And now play us one of those lovely *nocturnes* of Chopin's, it is just suited to the hour and scene. I think there is so much in the time, and situation, to thoroughly enjoy music."

"There is in souls a sympathy with sounds,
And as the mind is pitch'd, the ear is pleased,
With melting airs or martial, brisk, or grave;
Some chord in unison with what we hear,
Is touch'd within us and the heart replies."

And so Hester played on till the sunset gave way to twilight, and the closing flowers wafted in their evening incense, and night came on gently in her grey robes.

CHAPTER X.

Sir Ernest and Lady Beldon were sitting in their pretty morning room at Heminglee, which was very modern and very pretty, with its soft chintz of pale blue and roses. The long French windows were open, letting in the sweet scented air from the tall lilies and standard roses, and Esmé flitted in and out bringing in baskets full of flowers, which she was soon deftly arranging. She looked as sweet and girlish as she did five months ago, on her wedding morn; her white soft dress, with its simple blue sash—the gay colours of the July flowers—made her a pretty foreground study, and the pale pink walls, with a few choice water-colours of great artists, gave an artistic touch to a charming interior.

"Esmé! You make a fellow frightfully idle. I feel I ought to be going, or doing something."

"Well, why don't you, dear?"

"It's so jolly here, little woman! So nice to have a wife of one's own, you know, to say nothing of her being the very loveliest ——" but Esmé stopped any more flatteries by going over to him as he lazily lounged in a low arm-chair, and kissing him. "Here you lazy person, let me decorate you with my flower, and do go somewhere. Stay! the very thing! Old Spence is in a way about the salmon for the dinner to-night, so suppose dear, you make an excursion into the town, and *bring* it. It will never do for me to be let down in my first dinner party. Just think what Hester would say! to say nothing of Mrs. Spence immolating herself like 'Vatel,' because the fish did not arrive in time!"

"All right, I will go." So Sir Ernest deliberately lighted his cigar, then kissed his wife, and turned back again. "I say, Esmé, why can't you go too?"

"Oh! Ernest, what an idea! Of course not! Why I have *hundreds* of things to see to, all these flowers to arrange, to say nothing of decorating the dessert, all which I mean to do myself. I should love to go and make all the sweets, but old Mrs. Spence would be horrified; she would say 'I never did it when I was at home.'"

"My dear little rosebud, it strikes me very forcibly she has reason on her side, and it might be quite as well that you should not try your 'prentice hand, when we expect all the heavy swells in the place."

"Oh! but Ernest, I really do know how; we used to see so much of it in Germany."

"No doubt, love. But I think Hester

showed her wisdom in letting you bring away clever old Mrs. Spence. I know of old, at 'The Towers,' the *cuisine* was perfection; and I owe much to dear Hester Lanyon for her thought of us. Believe me, little woman, a very great deal of married happiness has to do with well-cooked dinners."

"What *material* ideas you have, sir?"

"Simply practical, love. People can't live on roses or kisses—nice enough in their way—at least not married people. I believe lovers never require food, but all the married men of my acquaintance have very healthy appetites, myself for one."

"Well, dear boy, do be off, and do your share."

So with one more kiss he disappeared. And then his wife finished her flowers, and gradually filled every bracket and vase in her drawing-room, which was so dainty in

its appointments. She flitted about like a bird, her light footstep keeping time to her voice, as she sang from pure light-heartedness. She was deliciously happy, they simply idolised each other. Did she ever think of her old love? Never! He seemed to have faded from her view, and his place filled with the all pervading, all shadowing personality of her husband. She had none of the large mind of Hester. Hers was simply a sweet, soft, tender little heart, that had never known trouble, except that caused by Cyril Dashwood. In Hester she had found a loving guardian, sister, friend; she had slept as it were on rose-leaves, and had scarcely found even a crumpled one. Even, separated as they were by distance, the tender love of Hester never failed; every thought, hope and fear of the young wife was guided and guarded by her. If the young Baronet loved his wife above all

women, so he honoured Hester above every one.

Heminglee was a house that had been rebuilt, partly out of old material, but to all intents and purposes, it was modern. From the time of the death of his parents, his sister and brother-in-law, Sir Percy and Lady Willis, had made it their home. Sir Percy's affairs having been much involved, his young relative suggested that they should take up their abode at Heminglee, while he spent some two or three years on the Continent, and there it was Sir Ernest met his wife, though it was a long time before he saw the fruition of his heart's wishes.

After three years' of absence, he once more returned to his old home, and his sister and her husband to theirs. But when once the question of his marriage was

settled, the house then was newly decorated and furnished, and no mean setting was it, for the lovely young bride. His was no ancient family like the Lanyons; he was the fourth Baronet, the first having been a Lord Mayor of London, but they occupied a good position in the county; and now the advent of the beautiful Lady Beldon, as she was called, caused a flutter of excitement, especially among the women, who had heard dazzling accounts of her wonderful *trousseau*.

The dinner party to-night would consist of twelve guests, these were the *créme* of the neighbourhood, the lesser stars would follow later on, and in due course.

Very lovely looked Lady Beldon as she appeared for her husband's inspection before the guests arrived. Her dress was a very pale blue silk, covered with delicate lace and gauze, with clusters of beautiful

damask roses. Round her fair young throat was a single row of pearls, the gift of Hester, and her clustering nut-brown hair was fastened with a pin in the shape of a star, likewise composed of pearls.

"My pearl of pearls!" said he with pride.

"Then I shall do?"

"Very much so."

Then the guests began to arrive, and the pretty Lady Beldon gained fresh laurels that night. The ladies thought her dress perfection, and the men envied Beldon. She made a charming hostess, and her dinner was a great success, for Mrs. Spence surpassed herself.

CHAPTER XI.

Cyril Dashwood had been appointed to a living; it was not a very valuable one in his idea, but many of his cloth envied him. Three hundred a year, and a picturesque old vicarage. He shook the dust off his feet, and quitted Langton without regret on either side—his cold unsympathetic nature prevented him ever making real friends. He was exact to a degree, in all his duties, but they were all duties, no labours of love. You could not help having the conviction that if his mind was in them, his heart, certainly was not, and that just made all the difference. It was his profession in life. But his work was carried out with no enthusiasm, it was all done "decently and in order." Neither was

this Yorkshire living much to his choice: it was a dreary and rugged country, with wild desolate moors, a straggling village with no resident gentry within some four miles; and there seemed to be no doubt whatever he would have a great deal of his own company. And he had not improved for the better; he was harder and colder than ever, his handsome delicate features were sharper, and across his face a peevish irritable expression so often flitted, as to threaten to take up its abode there. He was a disappointed man. He had intended to do such great things for himself, and lo! everything had turned to Dead Sea fruit. However, here he was, and the only thing for him to do was to make himself as comfortable as he could, and with the help of the paternal purse he made his study the very perfection of clerical comfort. It was a pretty room, sunny in the

summer; and the garden was the most redeeming feature of the whole thing. It was old, and surrounded by mossy old walls covered with carefully trained fruit-bearing trees. The honeysuckle clambered over an old fence until it reached and covered a little thatched summer-house, where its late owner, a bluff, hearty Yorkshireman, had smoked his pipe of an evening, and his noisy boys and girls had run in and out. It was a place beloved and frequented of bees, to say nothing of other harmless creeping things, all utterly abhorrent to the fastidious taste of its present owner, who would infinitely have preferred a town living among civilized human beings to these outlandish, not over-polite, Yorkshire villagers. Their late parson suited them exactly, he was almost one of themselves, while this "new-fangled chap," who minced and mouthed his words,

had already incurred their ire. "Was not t'old church good enough for them and t'old parson?" The fact was, the frightfully bare, primitive old church, which looked very like a barn, with a few mouldy, old, worm-eaten pews, a damp looking pulpit, a chancel more like a cupboard than anything else, with a clumsy old table, and a wretched red cover, had utterly shocked and disgusted Mr. Dashwood. He also complained of there being no vestry, and the rustic churchwarden had laughed at him. "T'old parson put his surplice on as he went into the church." Finding he could neither get help nor sympathy, he had to spend some of his own money to make the place simply decent in his idea, for which his congregation, instead of thanking him, felt deeply resentful. If he could only have unbent and made himself more genial, there might have been some

soft spot to be found in their hearts; but his own want of sympathy had shut that door. Altogether he was not greatly to be envied. The principal family in his parish were absentees. At least, they had been so ever since *he* had been there, now getting on for six months, and even if they were at home, they were four miles off.

His household consisted of a middle-aged woman, and a lad of eighteen, who looked after his horse, and in odd moments attended to the garden. The late owner having his quiver more than full did his own garden work, and a labour of love it had been, of which the present owner was ungratefully unconscious. To him the carefully-trained wall fruit was only what it ought to be. The lovely syringa that came down with its starry blossoms nearly into his window, the soft monthly roses growing all over his porch, the delicate-

leaved Virginia creeper that now was so green, and would so soon be blood-red, conveyed no thoughts of the loving care that had trained and planted it. No, it was all there when he accepted the living, part and parcel of what he called a "hard bargain." What he did discover was the dreary, lonely moor, which stretched for miles on one side of him, and the miserable street which did duty for a village, and then more expanse, and in the far distance some bleak-looking hills, and beyond those hills Moor Hall, where the only gentry resided—when they *were* at home.

And time after time the thought would come over him, if only Esmé Curtis had been his wife, even this dull spot would have been tolerable. He could almost picture her flitting in and out of the old garden, up and down the stairs, her golden

head catching all the sunny lights, her two laughing blue eyes—and they might have been his! The thought was maddening. Truly it could be said of him:

> "Seldom he smiles, and smiles in such a sort
> As if he mocked himself, and scorn'd his spirit
> That could be moved to smile at anything."

And as he looked out of the window (the side window, for there were two in his study), his eye perpetually fell on the white marble tombstone of his predecessor, on which was written in bold black letters in all their freshness, the date, age, and qualities that had made him so beloved by the parishioners of Moretown. Every Sunday was the grave covered with such flowers as grew in the simple homely gardens of the few cottagers, all emblems of love, and somehow this weekly offering offended the eyes of Mr. Dashwood; it seemed to

extol the dead, at the expense of the living. So he sent to London for some "glacier paper," and when the villagers next Sunday looked at the study window, lo, it was full of stained glass! "better than the windows of t'old church!" They could not understand this at all. No glazier had been heard or seen. They shook their heads—it was all uncanny. It had the desired effect as regarded their vicar. He could sit in peace hidden from their view. But there was getting to be a settled dislike between the clergyman and his parishioners, though it only took the form of coldness. But in one sense they hardly did him justice. Never mind how dark or dreary the night was, it was quite sufficient if they required his services for him to go forth at any moment, he never pitied himself, it was his "duty"—cold, stern, hard duty—and it must be done. They hardly looked at

it in this light, it was done so coldly. He was trying with wonderful patience to encourage the few boys that the village could muster to sing in something like time and tune; he had replaced the wheezy old harmonium, which had nearly driven him wild, as it was well pounded by the village school mistress; and coming, as he did, from the well appointed service at Langton, it seemed as if this place was to be a form of punishment! So dreary and desolate! so ill at ease with himself and the world, that even the cold worn face of Matilda Brown would have been received with something like cordiality. And added to all his disgust of the place, he found the local cobbler, intended to set up against him as a rival, and have Sunday afternoon services—with the assistance of the wheezy harmonium lately discarded—in his low-pitched front parlour, and where, with the promises, of

nuts, and sweets, his choir boys were beguiled into constant desertion.

Once he had an inspiration! he wrote and asked his old rector, Canon Frampton, to send him Percy Blythe for two or three days. His picture of the place was so desolate, that the rector almost smiled. "I fear, Percy," said he, "they have put the square man into the round hole. He will have to alter considerably before he fits in. However, stay a week, I will rub along." So Percy came, saw, and conquered. His cheery genial ways, his pleasant voice, quite won these rugged hearts; he had found out their weak place. He told them he honoured their love for their old vicar, and nothing would give him greater pleasure than, when he died, to have the idea in his heart that *his* parishioners would come and deck his grave.

Why couldn't he stay with them?

Well! he had lots of work to do in his own parish, but when he could he certainly would. So that at last, these people thought Providence had used them very badly, in sending them a man they all disliked, and keeping back one that just suited them.

"Try and like them, old fellow! They are really not half bad. It's their *manners* that want mending—not their hearts."

"Possibly! though as yet I have seen nothing but rude sullenness and ingratitude for what little I have tried to improve in this God-forsaken place. If you could have seen that church, as I saw it! I should like to have all those damp old cupboards of pews taken down—levelled as it were!"

"Take my advice—which is brief—*Don't.*"

"Your reasons, Blythe?"

"These country minds move slowly. They do not discover, or even dream of, the deficiency which to you, coming from a well appointed service, must appear glaring. Why not let them come by degrees? Get them to love you first."

"Love me! Save the mark! They are nearer hating me!"

"Have patience, Dashwood! it will all come in time. I envy you. I only wish I were in your shoes!"

"Every man knows where his own shoe pinches!"

"True!"

"Mine not only pinch, but nearly crush."

"I expect most of us have a skeleton," said Blythe, almost sadly.

CHAPTER XII.

Colonel Luttrell was travelling Londonwards from Manchester. He had been staying with distant relations, relations whom he had not seen these fourteen years, and he had also received an invitation for Sabina later on. He would have to return to India in another six weeks, as his leave would soon be up. He took his seat in the night mail train, and prepared to make himself as comfortable as circumstances would allow. There were two other occupants of the carriage, and these followed his example, put on their travelling caps, produced their newspapers, lighted their pipes, and generally settled themselves to the best advantage for the long journey. It was not in the least cold, for it was a

mellow August night. The sky even now wore traces of amber light, and the moon was slowly rising almost as red as the sunset of an hour or two ago; above their heads the clear stars shone out like crystals. It was soft, and soothing, and the only sound, save of birds twittering in little farewell sounds, and an occasional lowing of cattle out in the summer pastures, was that of their own train as it passed swiftly along like resistless fate, smoothly, but surely. It had a drowsy effect, for Colonel Luttrell found both his companions settling for sleep. And he thought on—his mind somewhat perplexed, and his heart a little sore—three months from now, must find him again in harness, the old routine, the old strain; and the woman he came over to see, to be near, to love, apparently no nearer. She was gentle and playful, and kind beyond measure, but——. Ah! how

many "buts" there are in life, that make so much difference as we toil along. As yet, with him, the great question remained unsolved. Would she let him go back, never to see that charming face again? never to hear that teasing saucy voice that he loved? Ah! it would be terrible! No! he must have an answer, it must be settled, the suspense was getting more than he could bear. He had loved her so long, so faithfully, surely his reward must come! Yes it must! how or when he could not say to-night, and then his thoughts became dreams. A gentle somnolence overcame him. He thought he heard Edith say, "Selwyn I will reward you! You have been so brave, so true, I love you!"—— And then an awful crash! The carriage lamp was out! They seemed rolling over and over! A fearful blow on the head, his leg jammed in like a vice, the carriage

seemed crushing in his chest, and he knew no more.

Cries, and screams, and groans, rose up on that still summer night—nearly half the train had gone over the steep embankment. There lay the mighty engine, like some great monster wounded in the strife, and the risen moon looked down on dead and dying forms. Those whose fate had placed them in the rear of the train, hastened to the assistance of the unhappy victims. They were some distance from a station. The poor helpless wounded creatures were got out by willing hands, some were extracted with frightful difficulty, and the agonies of suffering was awful. Among others, poor Selwyn Luttrell, crushed, bleeding, unconscious, save for a death-like groan. With one of the singular hairbreadth escapes one hears of now and then in such carnage, the youngest of his two fellow travellers

had escaped injury; he hastened with the help of the guard to drag Colonel Luttrell out. They laid him on the bank, but feared to touch him.

"I fear he's done for, sir, but I must go to the wreck, and see what more there is to be done presently." To the young fellow's great delight, he could see tramping across the fields, men from a distant farm-house, and as they approached, he found, to his great joy, they bore cans of water, one or two bottles, and blankets. Who shall say there is no goodness, no beautiful charity in the world? He seized a can, and put some water into the unconscious lips—then a little brandy. After some little delay, out of the distant village came the doctor. Colonel Luttrell was found to have his leg broken, also two ribs, and a very serious blow on his head. As soon as possible, on a hurdle covered over

with a blanket, he was conveyed to the village Inn. There his kind young friend searched in his pocket and found his name. And himself walked off to the nearest station, and reached it just as his friend the guard, who was now using the wire—but promised the first chance to send off the telegrams, one to Dr. Lewis, Mayor of Langton, and one to Mrs. Grantley.

"You look a bit faint yourself, sir, have a pull at this; one of the farm servants gave it to me just as I started." It was some brandy and water in an ordinary medicine bottle.

Thankfully the young man partook of it, and then, both the guard and he returned to the wrecked train. They had lighted a large fire with the broken splinters, and now two or three doctors were hard at work. The poor engine driver lay an inanimate mass, crushed and

smashed beyond recognition. The guard pointed to the body as they passed. "Poor Bill! he's made his last journey. It will be bad news for his poor wife and six little ones!"

"Where do they live?"

"In London, sir!"

The young man dived into his pockets, and pulled out two sovereigns. "Give them this, there's a good fellow."

"God bless you, sir, that I will!" And the honest, kind-hearted fellow carried out the request, with a trifle of his own, to help the widow of the man who had died at his post. By an hour's time, a break-down gang had arrived, the wounded were cared for, and put into a fresh train, while those too bad for removal were, for the present, distributed in the village.

The young gentleman returned to the Inn, where he instituted himself guard-

in-chief to Colonel Luttrell, till the arrival of his friends. The host of the Inn got the young gentleman a good hot glass of brandy and water, and some bread and cheese, for which he was most thankful. Then, bathing his tired head and face with water, he once more took up his post beside the injured man. The doctor had just finished setting the leg, the rest of the poor body was bound up, and the head bandaged.

"You know something of this gentleman I believe?"

"Yes, I find he is Colonel Luttrell, a great friend of some friends of mine. I have telegraphed to them, and I expect they will be here as soon as train and carriages can bring them."

"That is well! It will be a long affair I fear."

"Is he badly hurt?"

"Very badly! His leg is broken and two ribs."

"And his head?"

"That is the least hurt, but he is suffering from concussion as well. He will require *most* careful nursing. We must have a nurse."

"I will take upon myself all responsibility, here is my card, pray order or suggest what you please."

"Mr. Charles Vere, Jermyn Street, Piccadilly."

"Well, Mr. Vere," said the doctor, after perusing it. "He owes almost everything to your prompt kindness."

"He is a brave soldier, that I know!"

Yes! it was kind Charlie Vere—who by strange coincidence had travelled almost unconsciously with the injured man.

The doctor gave him a few instructions,

and the eventful night turned to day. The guard had hunted in the break, and found Colonel Luttrell's portmanteau, which happened to be uninjured, in the farther part of the train, and also Mr. Vere's. In the course of two or three hours the nurse arrived, and at once took charge of her patient. Mr. Vere stood at the inn door. The lovely summer evening was beginning to throw longer shadows over the waving corn. In the distance he could see the embankment, the scene of last night's tragedy, thickly peopled with railway workmen and officials. The news-boy brought a London paper, and there was a highly sensational account of the killed and wounded, and amongst others the death of Colonel Luttrell was graphically described. Charlie Vere was deeply grieved to read this, feeling the terrible pain it would ause the Colonel's friends. He still stood

there as a fly drove up, and he hardly realised it was Mrs. Grantley. She was pale to the lips. He hastened to greet her.

"Oh! Mr. Vere; is—is he—?"

"He is alive, but unconscious."

"Thank God! thank God!"

And then the tears coursed each other down her pale and wearied face.

"Come in, Mrs. Grantley."

And he ordered her some wine, while he directed the landlord to have dinner ready as soon as possible.

He made her drink the wine, which he held.

"Oh, Mr. Vere, tell me all about it! How came you to be here? I am so upset, so miserable."

And again and again the tears came, but he did not try to arrest them; it would relieve the overburdened heart, and he guessed so much.

"I had been down to Manchester on some business of my own, and was returning by the night mail, and I intended to join Lady Laura and Mrs. Cohen in Paris to-morrow. When I got into the train at Manchester I did not for the moment notice Colonel Luttrell. As we journeyed on I *fancied* I had seen his face 'somewhere,' but only in a vague way. I think we all went to sleep, and it must have been two hours from our departure when the terrible accident took place. We were all three—for there was another poor devil in our carriage, God only knows what has become of him!—we were all thrown pell-mell, only I was at the top, and got out through the carriage window, which was above my head. The guard dragged me out, and then I hunted for my fellow-traveller, whose face had haunted me. We, after terrible difficulty, got him out,

and laid him on the bank till we could get medical assistance." Seeing her agitated face, he quickly continued: "His leg is broken, two ribs fractured, and a blow on the side of the head."

"What *does* the doctor say?"

"That he will need the most careful nursing, so I have arranged for a nurse, who is here, and with him now."

"God bless you! true friend," said Mrs. Grantley, impulsively grasping his hand. "I did not think I loved Selwyn Luttrell. And now I would almost give my life for his."

"Be strong and of good courage, dear Mrs. Grantley. While there is life there is hope. Now, do rest a little, and have some dinner, and then you can see him."

"My brother, Doctor Lewis, will be here soon."

"That is a comfort."

She took the much-needed refreshment, in which Mr. Vere joined her, for he, too, was very tired. Then afterwards she crept up the little rustic staircase into the homely "Guest-chamber." Her heart almost stood still. The motionless bandaged figure—the brown ruddy tinge replaced by a grey pallor—the death-like repose—the sick nurse, with her calm, noiseless tread. And *that* was her hero! He who had borne so patiently, endured her caprices, waited so long for some token of her love! There he lay—a quiet, patient creature, ready for death. Oh, it was agony! it was too much! She knelt down by the white, spotless bed, and then softly kissed the unconscious face—a kiss that would have brought heaven into the hungry heart of Colonel Luttrell. Ah, it is so! So long as we can have it for the asking, it is naught! it is naught! but when it is withdrawn—

then all its virtues, all its beauties are so clear—but they are no longer ours.

Supposing he *should* be taken from her? Well, she would stay with him to the last.

Later on, Dr. Lewis came, and he and the local doctor consulted, but nothing more could be done than was being done. Dr. Forbes, spoke most highly of Mr. Vere and his faithful self-denial.

"There is no chance of Colonel Luttrell being fit to return to India in six weeks' time?"

"Most decidedly not; it will be months before he is fit for service."

"I must take his affairs in hand then," said Dr. Lewis.

Dr. Lewis, after a day or two's stay at the little village of Adingford, was compelled to return to Langton; but Mrs. Grantley took up her abode at the bedside of the sick man. She and "Sister Grace" bore

the heat and burden of the day. And the August days flew past, and September, with its busy harvest-tide, was upon them. Sabina had been sent for, but in the village Mrs. Grantley had found some nice old-fashioned apartments not very far off from the Inn. So there was a little *pied à terre*, where Mrs. Grantley ran to and fro, and where Sister Grace had a tiny little bedroom, where, in her turn, she could rest.

Dr. Forbes pronounced a gradual improvement, and that hope carried them through much weariness of body and much tribulation of mind.

CHAPTER XIII.

Percy Blythe did enjoy his week in the gay Metropolis, in spite of Sabina Maitland and the perpetual presence of Colonel Luttrell. But, on the other hand, Mrs. Grantley was dangerously kind to him. She was determined, as he had come up, he should enjoy it. The pictures, the Park, the flower-shows, the concerts, and the theatres, was a perfect mental kaleidoscope which he would have to arrange on his return home. Sabina laid herself out to please; he was pleased—but su imely indifferent. Certainly he preferred Sabina in a pleasant humour to a disagreeable one. It was in vain she put on her pretty gowns, or decorated her beautiful dark hair. It was Mrs. Grantley who filled his vision—

Mrs. Grantley and no one else; and yet *she* was grieved, because she felt so kindly towards him; but of love there was nothing—she said to herself—she loved no one. She was so happy in her life; she dearly loved her independence. Her dead husband had been so indulgent, so tender of her every thought and wish; should she ever find anyone like him again? No! she was almost sure she would not. Her love for him had been for him by no means ardent; but it was a love which grew day by day, in its gentle steadiness, and it had pervaded everything. She had no room in her heart for Percy Blythe. But if he would be only satisfied with her friendship, it would greatly please her. He never tormented nor worried her, but his face was a continual protest; sometimes it looked joyously happy, and at others hopelessly de-

pressed. It was all such a pity! she thought.

"Whatever happens, Mrs. Grantley, I shall always look back on this week, it has been so beautiful!"

"I never heard of 'sight-seeing' being beautiful before," said Sabina, entering the conservatory, where the two were. "Interesting it may be, but not beautiful."

"Probably not," said young Blythe, coldly, "but if I find it beautiful, there is no objection to my appropriating its beauties."

"Oh dear no!" But Sabina knew he was not referring to the "shows" he had seen, but to the happiness the week had brought with it; and he owed it all to *her*. And this was the reward! But for her, would he have had it? Certainly not. And there he was, just sighing his heart out for this Edith Grantley. And her uncle

almost as bad. It was too much. Surely she (Mrs. Grantley) had had *her* day. The young always think that any woman over three or four-and-twenty is quite old, forgetting oftentimes, that many men prefer the cultured intellect of a charming woman to mere physical beauty, and a crude young mind. Love is of no age, and it is never old, for it bestows an elixir on all its votaries. Do we not say "Love is blind"? To love is to keep the heart young. Whereas, Sabina looked upon it as a possession peculiar to youth. So she felt herself defrauded. Hitherto she had only to ask, and to have; and why should this blonde-headed curate be denied her? And, with a strange contrariness, the more he avoided her, the more her heart went out towards him.

Colonel Luttrell had likewise found out the young man's secret, but he felt no

jealousy, because he saw the love was not returned, neither did he feel sure about his own affairs, nevertheless he was not sorry on the whole to see Mr. Blythe depart—he seemed to have Edith Grantley more to himself.

Did she never feel any reproach? As she saw, day by day, Selwyn's increasing love and devotion—so kind, so tender, and yet so masterful—she felt sure some day she would be beaten on all points, but would hold out as long as possible.

Meantime, the summer was passing by. The season was over, London was tired. It wanted a good gulph of sea-air, to fill the vitiated lungs, to gather force to go through another and another season. To get out of the way of those holiday folks! whose only Saint is St. Lubbock. Those folks, whose lungs never do get replenished, who just toil on till they drop out of life,

too weary, too tired out, to continue the struggle, and whose place in the ranks is filled up so soon, that their very absence is never noted.

Mrs. Grantley had been down again at Langton, but she intended to go over with Sabina to Homburg, there to drink the waters, and to enjoy the distractions, of that gay, wicked little place.

Colonel Luttrell, a little later on, intended with Edward Lewis to join them, but before he left England he had to find out a distant branch of the Luttrells, who lived far away, down in Lancashire. He made the journey, as we know, and with what terrible results.

And now, for some weeks, he had been hovering between life and death, an unconscious pitiful figure.

Mrs. Grantley had come in with a basket of fresh flowers, which she was

arranging in a vase. The nurse and Sabina had started for a walk. She arranged the little bed-room to the best advantage, the open window admitted the sweet country air, then she drew a little table towards her, and commenced writing her letters. The afternoon sun lighted up her face with a tender light, it was a little worn and pale; and then she looked softly at the motionless figure, and with a sigh, resumed her writing.

Presently a very faint sigh reached her, an echo of her own. "Edith," it said.

"Selwyn!—thank God!"

Then she went round to him, and pressed her lips lovingly on the wasted cheek.

"Raise my head, Edith."

She did so with infinite tenderness.

Then their eyes met, his so dim, hers so

full of the new light, which he could hardly see.

"Selwyn dearest, Will you try and live for me?"

"At last! Edith! raise my face to yours, and let me kiss you."

She raised his head on her shoulder, and then, all weak as he was, he gave her a kiss, with all the love of years in it.

"Now dear! You must take this medicine, and get a little sleep, and then, by-and-bye, I will talk and tell you everything."

"There must be so much to explain," he murmured feebly; then she settled the pillows, with gentle touch, and with a little light kiss on his heavy eyelids bade him sleep. When, two hours later, the doctor looked in, he found his patient conscious and refreshed.

"He will do now, Mrs. Grantley! No

excitement and plenty of nourishment! Has sister Grace come in yet?"

"No, doctor. I told her to take her time. She and Miss Maitland have gone on a nutting expedition."

"Well, it will do them good! Colonel Luttrell is in good hands—only be very cautious."

"Doctor! how came I here?" said the invalid with weak voice.

"Oh! that's too long a tale to tell now. Only wait till you are stronger. There will be a budget, I can tell you."

So the patient—too weak, too weary to argue, and yet so perfectly restful in this unlooked-for happiness — with half-closed eyes, watched the form he loved moving so softly about, with deft womanly hands, putting a touch here, and touch there. Close by his bedside was a bowl of glorious Gloire de Dijon roses, opening out their

rich leaves, and sending forth their delicate perfume. Almost like a child, he looked and wondered at the strange, clean, homely room, with the bed furniture, smelling so fragrant of lavender. He realised something serious must have happened to him. But why speculate? Whatever had been the cause, the result was happiness, that was enough for him. He had something to live for——. Then, by-and-bye, Sabina came in, and she was thankfully grateful to kiss her uncle, and could hardly keep back her tears.

"Sabina, child!"

"*Dearest* Uncle Selwyn! You are going to get strong again? Oh! do try!"

A gentle smile hovered over his face. Then the nurse, with gentle peremptoriness, dismissed her, and proceeded to look after her patient, while Mrs. Grantley, with a farewell kiss, went out for a drive, which

had for its bourne the station, from whence she sent off a telegram to her brother, announcing the cheering change in the invalid. Her own heart was lightened, and she knew now she loved Selwyn Luttrell.

It was now decided by Dr. Lewis and his sister to send for Andrews, the Colonel's soldier servant, who was only too eager to come and help to wait on his master. Dr. Lewis was much impressed by the calm, pleasant cheerfulness of Sister Grace, with her neat costume. Her face, not even pretty, but marked with strength and endurance, with such sweet womanliness written in her gentle blue eyes, and then her neat methodical habits so delighted him, that at last an "idea" became rooted in his mind. One day he startled his sister very considerably by saying: "Edith!

should you think Sister Grace could ever be transformed into Wife Grace?"

"Edward!"

"I really have been thinking over it very seriously. You see, Edith, it is just this——" and he pushed his spectacles on his forehead, and pointed his sister to an adjacent chair. "Of course, when Selwyn gets well, you will marry him?"

"I suppose I shall! poor fellow!"

"Exactly! and where am I? Nowhere! So it seems to me to be perfectly reasonable that I should try to find out some nice suitable person who would not object to my collection. You know, Edith, it *is* very valuable, and fancy the damage a thoughtless person would do! Now, what has struck me so much in Sister Grace are her quiet, tidy habits! And then she moves so softly! She never brushes or bangs about! She doesn't

wear trains that catch and trip you up! Believe me, dear, I have studied her."

"So it seems, Edward," said Mrs. Grantley, with a twinkle in her eye, at the very business-like qualities the Mayor of Langton was summing up.

"And she is suitable in age!"

"And how old should you say she was?" asked his sister blandly.

"Oh, about forty, or thereabouts!"

"My dear, she is only thirty."

"Bless me, you don't say so! How unfortunate! That's certainly awkward! Dear, dear!"

"Why, Edward, most people would consider it an advantage."

"No, my dear, not in my case. I want some one who will take care of my interests, and would help me in my 'Book of Natural Science.'"

"Then you have no doubt, excepting her age, she would be suitable?"

"Yes, she is exactly what I want."

"Then why don't you suggest it to her?"

"That is just my difficulty; I don't know how she might take it."

"'Faint heart,' you know."

"That is all very well, but that only refers to young people, romance, and such like. You see, when a man is turned fifty, he does not indulge in illusions, but realities. And I want somebody who will be a help, not a hindrance. Edith, could you not suggest it, or place my wishes before her in a pleasant light? She should be well provided for, and I am not difficult to live with, am I, dear?"

"No, dear, that you are not," said Mrs. Grantley, kissing him affectionately. "Well, I will see what can be done, dear old Ted."

And Mrs. Grantley did see. A day or two afterwards, leaving Doctor Lewis and

Andrews in charge of the invalid, she and Sister Grace set out for a drive in the village fly. The autumn tints were beginning in all their splendour, the fresh smell of the newly-turned earth, the clear crisp air, the light sky and sunny vistas, were all tempting. And Sister Grace enjoyed it thoroughly.

"How much longer must we keep the Colonel here, nurse?"

"Perhaps another fortnight. Then I think he will want a change, a warmer climate by the sea."

"And then, when your task is over here, where is your next move, Sister Grace?"

"Back to the Institution, if I am required; if not, I shall take a holiday."

"I think you said you have no parents?"

"No, they have been dead these many years."

"Is it not a hard, weary life?"

"No, not when you get used to it. Besides, I *must* work for myself, you see. I am not clever in anything else, but I *am* considered to have an aptitude for nursing."

"You never thought of marrying? Pray do not think me rude."

"Yes, I did, years ago."

"Then 'he' died?" said Mrs. Grantley gently.

"No! 'he' married some one else," replied the nurse, in quiet, matter-of-fact tones.

"Oh!" said Mrs. Grantley, shocked.

"It is ten years ago. I do not even think of it now. I was never good-looking."

"Sister Grace, suppose any one should ask you to marry them now? Would you?"

"Nobody is *likely* to ask me," said the other, with a pleasant laugh. "You see, I am *ni jeune, ni belle*—two very important items!"

"But supposing I know someone who thinks your only fault *is* that you are too young?"

But Sister Grace only laughed again, the idea amused her.

"*Really*, I know of a gentleman this moment, who would be grateful if you would do him the favour of marrying him."

"Mrs. Grantley," exclaimed the nurse in astonishment. "What strange jokes you do make!"

"It is no joke, I really mean it."

"Well who *is* it, then?"

"My brother, Dr. Lewis."

"Dr. Lewis want to marry *me?*"

"Yes."

"It is very strange. I do not understand it!"

"Dear Grace," said Mrs. Grantley, putting out her two little gloved hands, and taking the other's in hers. "Be 'Sister' Grace in reality. You know for weeks you and I have seen much of each other, and I daresay you have guessed Colonel Luttrell and I are much to each other," (and with a charming little blush she continued): Directly he is convalescent we are going to be married, and *then*, you see, poor Edward would be *quite* alone. So that if you could agree to it, you would please him and please me. And he is so kind-hearted and simple. I can't tell you what he has been these last few years to me." But there was a tear in her eye that pleaded eloquently for her brother.

"Did Dr. Lewis ask you to tell me all this?"

"Indeed, he did. He is very humble-minded."

"Well, I will see him later on myself."

"That is but right and just. Now dear, let me kiss you and think, *perhaps*, I may have a new sister."

"Mrs. Grantley, you *are* a dear sweet woman."

"My dear, my only fear is that you will *both* prove too humble-minded."

Then Mrs. Grantley sought her brother.

"Edward, I have done everything but the love-making, and *that* you really must do yourself."

"There will be no need for love-making. It will not be a love-match, but a right down sober, earnest arrangement between two sensible people; and there is no reason why we may not be happy, Edith—in our way, of course."

"Ted, dear old boy, please to remember

this much ; it is not *everyone* who can live on grubs, butterflies, and other such creatures. People who have hearts require sometimes other sustenance. I don't *quite* think Sister Grace's heart is a fossil. If anything, it is rather human than otherwise."

"I will do my best, dear. Could you arrange for me to see her ?"

"Certainly ; go down to the cottage and send Sabina to me."

In the meantime Sister Grace, sitting in the little homely parlour of the cottage, the smell of the Gloire de Dijon roses coming in softly and sweetly as they climbed over the window and caught the rays of the setting sun—pondered over it all. Should she accept this strange offer—might she? Nay, *did* she not get sometimes tired with thinking and her own solitary inner life? And as the years went on, would she not feel it more and more? Yes, Dr.

Lewis was kind and tender—*that* she had seen; and as he often watched her, she concluded it had been with professional approbation. But by this new light she saw it in its true colours—and then she saw him coming down the lane, and the roses wafted in a few leaves; and she drew in a rosebud as it swayed gently with the breeze, and held it in her hand. Would there be warmth enough to expand it?

"Sister Grace, may I speak with you?"

"Certainly, Dr. Lewis. Will you come in?"

"How picturesque this cottage looks, with those Gloire de Dijon covering it."

"Yes. I was speculating how many more buds would come out. True, this is a south aspect; but the October nights are chill. Only it is a hardy rose!"

"There are many human flowers, Miss Grace, that are hardy, and yet sweet.

Look at that beautiful bud you hold in your hand. If it had been in a warmer quarter, it would have expanded into a lovely rose. As it is, it will live and die a bud—because there will not be sufficient warmth for it. I want you to expand into the rose of my home—to be its mistress, my helper, my companion, my fellow-worker. Look upon me as the old grey wall; and think what a charming covering you might make, hiding my deficiencies, putting new colour, new life in it all!"

"Dr. Lewis! I thought you were a philosopher, and I find you a poet!"

"Nay, nay! young lady. Do not laugh at me!"

"Laugh at you! Indeed, no! I respect you far too much for that."

"Miss Grace! can you find it in your heart to take me? Just as I am?"

"Yes, Dr. Lewis. For I believe you are a good man."

"I will try to be so," he answered, gently.

"Of course, you would understand I cannot settle anything until poor Colonel Luttrell is well off my hands. He still requires much care. Both Dr. Forbes here, and I agree that in a week or two's time he ought to be moved to a warmer climate. This is too bleak for a convalescent. Bournemouth or the South of France would be better."

"I quite agree with you. But I think Edith, with Sabina and Andrews, can manage now without either you or me."

"I expect they can," said Sister Grace, with a pretty smile that lit up her face.

"Very well. When my sister goes, I shall want my wife. That is quite understood, and perfectly reasonable?"

"Yes. That is reasonable."

"Good-bye, then. And thank you deeply for your goodness to an old man."

"Old man! Why, Dr. Lewis, you are not much over fifty."

"No; but I thought all young people called that old. Sabina says I am very ancient."

"But I am not a young person, Doctor. And much study and thought make one old. I feel fifty, even if I am thirty."

"Then, dear, redeem the years that the canker-worm has wasted," said Dr. Lewis, with kindly affection. "Now, God bless you. Edith will be so glad," and with a kiss of blended kindness and affection the Doctor took his departure.

Sister Grace watched him musingly up the lane on his way back to the Inn. "I am sure he is both kind and good. I think I have done right. Yes; I am sure! I

have no one to consult. There will only be one nurse less at the Institution."

"Well, Edward! I can see by your face you have been successful. I am *glad*, dear."

"Yes! it was very good of her. But nothing is to be settled till you and Selwyn are married."

"I am in no hurry to part with my little Edith," said her brother with deep affection. No! he was sure there *could* be no woman so fair, so charming, as his step-Sister Edith, and no one knew better than Mrs. Grantley of the kind, honest, upright simplicity of her brother. So she thought Sister Grace had drawn no small prize in the lottery of life.

CHAPTER XIV.

A MORE cheerful or pleasant house it would be almost impossible to find than that of Mr. and Mrs. Vere. They had settled in one of those palatial—as the estate agent would say—residences near to the South Kensington Museum. Everything about them was new. The newest designs, the latest carpets!

"Don't let us have any of those depressing dingy arrangements! I hate old things. But let us have everything bright, fresh, sweet, cheerful." And so it was, garlanded with flowers, inside and out. It looked the embodiment of affluent cheerfulness. They loved to gather round them friends of the Bohemian world—people who were more agreeable than conventional.

Whom, the pose of Lady Clara Vere de Vere was not so much appreciated as a brilliant "mot," "a new song," "a charming sketch," "a rising genius"—everything was of "to-day. The latest scientific discovery—the new actor—the last book. And Pauline was thoroughly happy. And Charlie, in her pleasure, was perfectly satisfied. Again the dimples visited her pretty face. There was no one to thwart her, no one to vex her. True, Lady Laura would have preferred that her daughter's house should have been more exclusive, with a flavour more distinctly aristocratic about it. But it was all no good. If Mrs. Vere had any tastes at all, they were essentially democratic.

"Good gracious, mamma! do you suppose, after all the misery the 'Vanseurs' have caused you and I in our lives, I care one toss whether or not they put their

aristocratic noses inside my door? I would just as soon they stayed away! I hear 'Frampton' intends to honour my next 'At Home.' I shall just tell him what I think."

"Better not, Pauline!"

"Oh, but I shall, mother! We can just snap our fingers at them all!"

"Pauline, love, *do* not get vulgar; it is not 'good form.'"

"I can't help it, mother! I have been repressed so many years, I am bound to break out somewhere."

"You will shock them so, dear! It will reflect upon me, and they will say how badly I have brought you up."

"Let them, mother! They should have made the allowance larger, and the result (myself) would have been more highly developed. As it is, I am as happy as a country lark! Vulgarly happy! Dear old Charlie, he is as good as gold! I believe

I am the the most fortunate person in London."

"Well, darling! that is a great thing," said her mother, kissing the bright, pretty face. What was the use of lecturing a person who was supremely happy?

"We are going to have the theatricals in the large drawing-room, mother. Santis, of the Elysium, is going to send us scenery, and he and Charlie are now hard at work over the piece. Bring Sabina Maitland round early to-morrow, so that he can coach her well up in her part. Eva Mountchesney is one of the characters."

"Miss Mountchesney is not in society," said Lady Laura stiffly.

"What does it matter! As if you could not find as nice people outside this stupid social pale as inside! Anyway, they are a deal more respectable!"

"My dear! as the granddaughter of an

earl that speech is not *comme il faut* or becoming!"

"Dear, darling mother! I hate *comme il faut*—and as the granddaughter of an earl I have a right to know something of them and their doings—and I prefer our set infinitely!"

"Well, dear, above all things, don't get talked about!"

"Never! while I have as good a husband as Charlie. Why, mother! whom have we here?"

"Your cousin Frampton. Do receive him nicely."

A young man was just announced, tall, pale, slight, perfectly dressed—what you would call a lady-like young man! He moved slowly and languidly to where the ladies were sitting.

"How do you do, cousin Pauline? And are you quite well, aunt Laura?"

"Quite well, thank you, Arthur! How is your father?"

"Oh, his lordship was quite well when I saw him last, but I hear he has symptoms of gout. I don't see him very often, you know."

"I am very sorry to hear that," said Lady Laura with polite hypocrisy—for nearly all her sufferings and mortifications had come from this cousin, Earl Vanseur, lately Lord Frampton.

Pauline expressed no regret; privately she thought it would serve him right.

"Cousin Pauline! I hear you are busy getting up a play, Ah! what is it, may I ask?"

"'The Good-natured Man,'" she answered drily.

"Ah! never heard of it! I suppose it's original?"

"Perfectly so."

"Ah! Some fellow here wrote it? friend of Mr. Vere's?"

"No! Mr. Vere has not the pleasure of his acquaintance, only of his works."

"Arthur, do you not remember? It is one of Goldsmith's plays?" said Lady Laura, scandalised at his ignorance and her daughter's love of mischief.

"No, really!" and a very faint blush did just tinge Lord Frampton's face. "I never read those fellows, don't you know."

"I suppose then you never saw 'She Stoops to Conquer?'"

"Oh yes, I did, though!" said his lordship, with something like animation. "I remember pretty Lydia Craven in it; she might conquer any fellow! only there are so many fellows, don't you know!

"Well, good-bye Cousin Frampton, we are going to rehearsal in half-an-hour. *I* have to study a little."

"Oh I say! Cousin Pauline, are all the parts filled up?"

"No! There are still two men's parts vacant!"

"Could I take one? I should like it awfully, don't you know!"

"There's the 'Butler!' But he is always tipsy. Of course you never could have been *tipsy* in your life? Only common people get screwed."

"Oh by Jove, that's a mistake!" said his lordship eagerly.

"Well! there's another part, that of 'Mr. Lofty.' I fancy that would just suit you!"

"Now really! that's awfully nice, Cousin Pauline."

Pauline opened a side door, and called out in clear tones: "Charlie! My cousin, Lord Frampton, wants a part. I think 'Lofty' will just suit him." And with that

she pushed the young nobleman into the study, and rejoined her mother.

"Pauline! How can you?" said Lady Laura, angrily, "you are making a complete fool of him."

"Not one whit more than he is. Idiotic, milk-and-water creature, with his 'awfully' and his 'don't you know.' On the contrary, if we make a *man* of him (though, with such a face as he has got, it will be well nigh impossible), his father ought to thank us."

"Pauline! I do not half like it."

"Mother, did you invite him? or did I? neither of us! He came unasked. We do not care for him, unless he has something in him. We don't care for fools, I can tell you!"

"Still! he is of our blood, Pauline."

"It's nothing to boast of, then. Oh, mother, let him stand or fall by his own

merits. Why should you stand sponsor for him, because he happens to be your second cousin, even if he does call you Aunt Laura? Why he isn't a patch upon Adolphus Frampton, mischievous as that boy is. There is no humbug about it, he is a downright honest young rascal. He is at Langton, with Aunt Louisa, otherwise—"

"I am very glad he is where he is! And, Pauline, be careful about Sabina Maitland, because while her uncle and aunt are at Nice, I feel very responsible."

"I will take every care, mother, rest assured, and come as often as you like, dear, and play propriety. I want Aunt Louisa, and dear Uncle Harry, to come up for my play. It is to be on 'Twelvth night,' mother, of the New Year, don't forget!"

"Nay, love, I won't forget. I will bring

Sabina round by eleven to-morrow—will that do?"

"Thank you, dear!" and Mrs. Cohen saw her mother safely into the comfortable little brougham, which her improved means enabled her to keep."

Pauline tripped back into her house, and her mother drove homewards, a little anxious, but by no means unhappy. Pauline looked so radiant, so gay, and she was so thoroughly happy. Lady Laura felt her great safeguard was the love her daughter bore her husband. He really ruled his wife by love. Pauline's was a nature that could not be driven. And the one tender spot in Lady Laura's heart was her great love for her only child. Pauline had a different disposition from her mother, it was more true and honest at the core, but heedless, and careless, and of no great depth.

CHAPTER XV.

To say that Langton was amazed was to say very little. They almost felt bewildered—that Mrs. Grantley had left them and married Colonel Luttrell! And that the Mayor, of all people, should have married again! It was true they knew nothing of his first wife, but the fact of his having been a widower so many years seemed in their idea to bar any further matrimonial arrangements. And here he was married and done for! And Dr. and Mrs. Lewis had just issued cards for a reception, or, in other words, "A Tennis party" for the opening of the Tennis season. Langton Proper had paid its respects to the new Mrs. Lewis, but Langton General had still its duties to do.

Once more the "Red House" was thrown open hospitably. And the pretty old garden, now decked in its Spring attire, its lilac and laburnams, its cherry blossom, looked gay, while the beautifully-mown lawn invited the eager votaries of the game. And in the large drawing-room stood the new Mayoress ready to receive her guests. A quiet, self-possessed, lady-like figure, well, though neatly, dressed, in soft grey velvet, with simple little frills at collar and wrist. Yes! she was decidedly pleasant-looking, and when she smiled her face lighted wonderfully. Dr. Lewis was better dressed, and looked very satisfied, but as the people filed out into the sunny garden, they all felt a tinge of regret for bright Mrs. Grantley. "Ah! there never would be two of her," said David Brown; "it isn't to be expected. Yon lady's right enough,

never fear; but it's that we just loved t'other one."

"Yes, Mr. Brown, that we did, and that we do," said Lady Louisa. "But you must consider how lonely Dr. Lewis would have been, with no wife, no sister, or daughter."

"Quite true, my lady, quite true! And pray don't suppose I am for saying one word against his Worship, who to my mind is as kind and simple a soul as you would meet on a day's march. And, please my Lady, how is Mrs. Grantley — begging her pardon — Mrs. Luttrell, and the Colonel?"

"I am glad to say Colonel Luttrell is now really well, only just a very little lameness. And Mrs. Luttrell is quite well, and as bonnie as ever. They have, as you know, passed the winter in a beautiful warm country, and that has done wonders

for the Colonel. We expect them home now very soon."

"That's good hearing, my Lady."

Then Lady Louisa was required elsewhere, and Mrs. Frostick took possession of Mr. Brown.

"Well, Brown, what do you think of the Mayoress?"

"I think she seems a nice winsome woman, and the Doctor is quite right to get married again."

"We shall have you getting married again, David Brown!" said Mrs. Frostick, tartly.

"Nay, nay, neighbour! I should put none in the place of my Nancy! My lassies will do for me. There isn't a woman in the place to beat Tilly in stuffing a chine."

"That's not everything!"

"Maybe not, but it's a good way on.

And Harriet, she looks after the 'posies' and the flowers, and such like in the garden. They are real good lassies, both of them."

Old David had an instinct that Mrs. Frostick was secretly hostile to his daughters, and it was quite enough to put him on his metal. But he spoke the truth—they *did* look after the house, and beautified it according to their lights (borrowed from Lady Louisa and Mrs. Grantley). The flowers that freshly adorned the rooms were Harriet's especial province, and, as her father said, "There wasn't a better cook in all the town than Tilly."

But Mrs. Frostick could never secretly forgive these young women for being their mother's daughters, and even now it angered her to be the unwilling witness of his love for his dead wife and her children.

The Rev. Percy Blythe walked about in this throng of people with a heart wounded to the death, but he bore no outward trace. He was as kind and gentle, as unselfish as ever, getting to be almost invaluable to the Rector, who relied upon him in everything; courteous to all women as a knight of old, but heart-proof to every blandishment of the whole sex. There had come a slight softening of the blow at the time of Mrs. Grantley's marriage. She wrote him a letter full of womanly kindness, telling him of her approaching marriage, and how the lover of her youth had waited and waited, until at last death nearly marked him for his prey, how essential she had become to Colonel Luttrell's absolute life. And then she went on to claim his friendship: "We can at least have that pleasure, dear Percy, in life. Write and give me all Langton news, and how you

like my dear new sister-in-law. And believe me ever your friend." And he had tried to follow her instructions, to live as she would have him, but it was as yet uphill work. As her love would have made his life golden, so its absence made it of dull neutral tint. He devoted more and more of his time to his work.

As for the Rector, he loved him ; indeed, he felt he was almost selfish in his monopoly of the younger man. But there was a deep trust and sympathy between the two, and Lady Louisa had unconsciously, as it were, put him into the vacant place so long filled by her godson, Gerald Lanyon. She had guessed his secret long ago, and with her soft tender heart tried with motherly kindness to comfort him. Added to this, Master Adolphus was to be got ready for Cambridge. His mother's suggestions he politely ignored, and the person

who had the most influence over him was Percy. The Rector was quietly patronised by the nineteenth-century lad. In his own way the young man most certainly loved his father, and if any one had said one word to that father's disadvantage, Mr. Adolphus Frampton would have very soon given him the benefit of his pugilistic education, which between whiles had been carefully attended to at Eton.

The Framptons, of Langton, were a distant branch of the Vanseur family; while the late Earl Vanseur had been the father of Lady Laura and Lady Louisa, he had stood in the relationship of cousin to Canon Frampton. The present Earl was cousin to the two ladies, and, if anything, more distantly removed to the Rev. Harry Frampton, so that now they had really little in common between them except the name.

Canon Frampton was a man of fairly ample means, but prudent withal. He was most anxious that his only son should study for the Bar, but as yet that young man had declined to study for any special purpose; if he had any predilection for anything at all, it was for "the noble art of self-defence." So that really he occupied a good deal of Mr. Blythe's time in trying to persuade him to set to work. He took very kindly to the various tennis parties, and, being a very good-looking youngster, had all the feminines on his side, beginning of course with his mother. But he was at an age when women's society is not particularly appreciated by young men. If he had any very small weakness at all, it was for Adelaide Craster, who was pretty, lively, lady-like, and seven years his senior, but it was very harmless, as his mother saw, and indeed she encouraged the very

faint interest he might feel in ladies' society. What he really did interest himself in was "ferreting," and nothing gave him greater pleasure than to go out on these secret expeditions. The rat-hunt to him was an intensely exciting, if ignoble, sport, much of which he kept to himself. So that Percy often felt the futility of trying to inspire the soul of the youth, whose thoughts and hopes were centred in a haystack or corn-rick, but, for his father's sake, he tried on. When Mr. Blythe did write to his friend Mrs. Luttrell, he gave her a graphic description of this promising scion of the Frampton family, which amused her hugely, and yet she felt this was the refreshment offered to the weary, tired heart of her poor prisoner of love.

The person whom Mr. Adolphus Frampton strongly objected to, was Mr. Johnson—his

freckled face, his nervous, agitated manner, his red hair, marked him out for many unfortunate *contretemps* One morning his boots were missing! and he was compelled to go to mattins in his slippers; another time his sermon could not be found; the buttons were off his cassock, which completely upset the Rector, who hated slovenliness as much as Dr. Lewis.

At last Percy spoke very strongly, though kindly to the lad:

"Do you never consider, my dear boy, the discredit all this brings on your father? Sooner or later all will be found out, and while your father is unjustly blaming Mr. Johnson—whose only fault is his nervousnsss—he——"

"Oh, he's such a counfounded muff"—colours up like a girl."

"Listen to me, sir!" said Mr. Blythe sternly. "What will your father feel,

when he finds all this silly bearish play has been executed by his only son? Remember, he has a position in this neighbourhood, and you have only Mr Johnson's gentlemanly feeling between you and your father's anger."

"By Jove! Blythe, I am very sorry. I will keep clear of 'Miss' Johnson for the future."

"I think if you had the faintest spark of the feelings of a gentleman, you would apologise to Mr. Johnson for the senseless annoyance you have caused him."

"Oh! come I say, that's coming it strong!"

"Not too strong for your silliness!"

"Do you really mean it?"

"Most certainly."

"Well, I will do the humble pie. Only, you know, I shall never like the fellow."

"That is of no importance. He will

certainly survive that. The question is to spare your father vexation." Then Mr. Blythe said with a quiet smile: "*You* can tell the Rector if you like!"

"Catch me! You won't, I suppose, Blythe?" he asked doubtfully.

"You must settle *that* with Mr. Johnson."

"All right, Percy. I think it was rather like a cad, after all."

"There can be no doubt of it. But still, Frampton, I shall believe in you when you make an honourable *amende* to Mr. Johnson."

"By Jove! I'll go and do it now, and get it off my mind!" And he was as good as his word, for Mr. Johnson nervously begged him to think no more of it.

Mr. Adolphus Frampton, anxious to show his return to decent behaviour, desired to commemmorate the event by a present; so he bought the handsomest

pipe his pocket-money would allow, which Mr. Johnson received in the kindest spirit, albeit he had a perfect horror of smoking.

Mr. Blythe felt that if by any chance he could improve the only son of his cherished friends, Mr. and Lady Louisa Frampton, it would go a slight way towards the deep debt of gratitude he owed them both, for their affectionate friendship and sympathy.

Mindful of Mrs. Luttrell's request, he showed in every way his anxiety to be of service to Mrs. Lewis, while she in her turn was simply invaluable to the committee of the Cottage Hospital. Her thorough practical knowledge of the whole thing, her clear good sense, made her very soon a person of importance in Langton; for they very soon found she was a person who could very well stand on her own basis. And the Mayor and Mrs. Lewis were an all-powerful faction.

CHAPTER XVI.

Mr. Dashwood was sitting in his study, sick and weary, so he lighted his pipe—that solace to so many weary brains. Then he opened the window and walked out to the garden. It had been raining; but the shower was over, and the smell of the garden was refreshing to a degree—so sweet, so pure. The sun came out and lighted up the rain-drops, as they hung from leaf and flower, like jewels. The roses covered the front of the house, and peeped in and out among the leaves of the creeper. To-day he appreciated all this! It soothed him, and he walked silently on, still smoking his pipe. But as he passed

by the summer-house he paused in his walk, for he heard a strange sound—some one sobbing! He looked in, and there, kneeling on the floor, in the greatest abandon, with her face buried almost in the hard wooden seat, and with her frame shaking with bitter sobs, was a young girl—at least he concluded so by the youthful form of the figure, for her face he could not see.

"Oh, father! father! if I could but see you! Could but kiss you only once! I could bear it all. Father! father!" And then the grief burst forth afresh. Mr. Dashwood stood in amazement. The girl turned suddenly round, and stood upright. "Sir, pray, pray forgive this intrusion! But I came to see *his* grave. And I could not resist the temptation to come here. I will retire at once."

"Stay! I beg. You are one of the daughters of my predecessor, Mr. Orme?"

"Yes! I am the third, Peggy—Margaret," she corrected with a blush. Her hair was drawn back and somewhat disordered, but tied at the nape of the neck. Her eyes, all full of tears as they were, had a gentle look in their hazel depths, the wet lashes were dark, while the flushed face had a sweet homeliness, though it was marred by excessive weeping. "I do not know what you can think of me, sir, but he did so love this place! We all helped to build it. Father made this seat, Kitty, Jack, and Polly put in these cobbles in the floor, I varnished it, Harry, our eldest brother, made this lattice work. And then in the evening, father would come and sit here! Oh Father!" and then her tears burst out afresh.

"Miss Orme, you will hurt yourself! Come in and bathe your face!" said he gently.

She left off rubbing her eyes, and looked up at him.

"Thank you!"

"My name is Cyril Dashwood."

"Will you forgive me? I must seem so rude!"

"Indeed, I will forgive you. Come in and tell me about your father. It will give me great pleasure!"

Then, somewhat consoled, she followed him into the little study.

"Jane! Bring some tea for Miss Orme!"

"Yes, sir!"

Mr. Dashwood poured out a glass of wine for his young guest.

"Now, drink that! and then my servant shall take you upstairs to bathe your face, otherwise you will get a headache!"

"Thank you! How kind you are!"

He smiled grimly to himself. She was

the first person who ever had called him kind, but somehow it moved him.

He rang the bell. Jane came hastily in with the tea. "Take this young lady upstairs. She is rather tried by coming to her father's old house."

"That I will, sir!" said the woman, full of sympathy.

And as they passed out, he arranged the cups and saucers, went out and returned with some jam and cake, and actually smiled as he did these little hospitable duties.

The girl soon returned, and old Jane made some tea, which Cyril thought never tasted so good before. He waited upon his guest and soon the grief, for the present, was banished.

She heartily enjoyed her tea, and he enjoyed his. It was so pleasant to have a *vis-à-vis*.

"Now tell me all about yourself, your father, and your brothers and sisters?"

"There were seven of us; like the children in the poem! Mother had been dead many years. First came Harry, he was our eldest, then Kitty, who was housekeeper, but she married just before father died, and went out to Australia with her husband, then Jack, then me, then Polly, and the twins—they are eight years old! They are living with Jack and Polly at Leeds, and I am governess at Moor Hall, at General Fraser's. We have just come back, we have been at Pau this last year, because Mrs. Fraser's health has been delicate. But to-day, they are all in London, and I could not resist coming over to father's grave."

"But how did you come?" said he with interest.

"I walked the best part of the way, and

then old Farmer Davis met me, and would make me ride in his cart. All the people know me so well," she said apologetically. "It was Miss Peggy here, and Miss Peggy there. You know we were all born in this house. Your bed-room was mine and Kitty's!—and to smell the roses in at the window! Oh! it was just like old times! And I feel father *must* be here somewhere! The very flowers, in the garden, speak to me of him!"

"Are you happy where you are? Are they kind to you?"

I do not think I can be happy anywhere —not very, you know. Oh, yes, they are kind. They pay me forty pounds a year, so that I can send half of that to Polly and Jack, so I ought not to complain. Only we were so happy, we all loved each other so dearly; and father—ah! we did just love him!"

"Now Miss Peggy, when *ever* you get the chance you are to come over. Consider every flower in the garden your own, and pick and take what you please. If I am out, never mind; Jane will get you all you want, and you shall tell me every now and again, what flowers you used to plant, and in what places, so as to keep the old garden as you all had it."

"How good you are, Mr. Dashwood, I think it almost the first bit of heart pleasure I have had since *he* died."

Again he was pleased.

"I suppose you all come to church Sunday?"

"Yes, we shall drive over."

"Then I shall look out for you."

"And now if you please, Mr. Dashwood, I must be going; it is fair again."

"Well, I suppose you had better. Go and put your hat on, and then we

will go into the garden and get some roses."

Her eyes lit up with pleasure. What pretty eyes they were.

She rose as she spoke, and his fastidious eye was pleased with the elegant cut of her French frock, black though it was. She was a thorough country girl, and yet there was a certain air of refinement about her.

"May I ask how old you are, Miss Orme?"

"Eighteen."

"I suppose you know something of these flowers?"

"Do you mean the roses?"

"Yes."

"This rich dark red one is a Louis van Houtte, and this white one Boule de Niege, this of course is a Maréchal Niel."

And so, from one to the other—he cutting, she explaining.

"Now, Miss Peggy, how do you think of getting back?"

"Why, walking, of course."

"But isn't it very far for you?" said he doubtfully, looking at the slight girlish figure.

"Oh, no, we *often* have walked over there."

"Well, let us be going."

"Are you coming too?" she asked in amazement.

"Certainly, part of the way."

And then they set off. She, with her hands full of her beloved roses, nodding here, and saying adieu there, to the villagers as they turned out to see her pass.

"Good-bye, Miss Peggy, come over soon. God bless you, Miss Peggy, dear!" and such like homely greetings. Cyril Dashwood wondered if they *ever* would say a kind word for him.

"They are such affectionate dear things," said the young girl, as they passed the last house and came out on to the moor.

"I can't say that has been my experience of them. I think they detest me."

"Oh! Mr. Dashwood, how could they? so kind as you are!" said she, quite shocked.

"But I am not sure I am kind—sometimes I feel right down angry, they seem so dense."

"I can't understand it—they always loved us so!"

"Perhaps that is it! They loved you and dislike me."

"I am so sorry! Don't you think if you had a wife, it would make a difference? You see they have always been accustomed to women-folk, and a good many of them!"

"One can't marry to order."

"No, I suppose not! Only I think you will need one—a wife I mean—or some lady to help you."

"Well, I must think over it!" said he with an amused expression, which she did not see.

He began to feel quite amiable. Here was a girl, who absolutely thought him "kind and good," whereas certain other women of his acquaintance had called him hard, opprobrious names, which had scathed his manhood, and made him very bitter with himself and others. And then he looked at the late Vicar's daughter.

The fresh wind that came across the moorland, had effaced the traces of tears. And her kindly reception at his hands, had cheered her. The permission to visit the beloved garden was a solace he could hardly dream of—keen affection of family

life, not being one of his attributes. But to the lonely girl, it was like a spirit world, where all her dear ones could assemble.

Every now and again the roses were raised to her lips, and she seemed to be holding silent converse with herself, which he did not interrupt. There was something in the simple honest confidingness of this girl, that appealed to the very best part of his nature.

"How beautiful the sky looks, Mr. Dashwood!"

"Yes! but there is electricity in those clouds, and it would not surprise me if we had a thunderstorm before very long. All I hope is, that you will arrive at Manor Hall before it breaks. Have you an umbrella?"

"Oh, I *am* sorry! I was stupid enough to leave it in the summer house."

"Fortunately, I have mine, but I will send over yours."

"Thank you much!"

They plodded on, and presently great drops began to fall slowly, the wind rushed past them with a moan, the short grass and weeds bowed to it with little shivers, and the heavy road with its great ruts, seemed to Cyril infinitely trying, as the wind grew stronger; then a distant growl of thunder far off, presently a sharp flash, and then there rolled over their heads a crashing peal, and the rain began to fall heavily.

Then Peggy stopped. "Mr. Dashwood, will you *please* go straight back home? I am so used to country storms, and these moorland ones, above all."

"Miss Orme, what can you think of me, to imagine such a thing? Surely if a woman can stand it, I must be a very feminine specimen of the male sex if I can-

not do likewise? Let us get on." And his umbrella protected them both.

"You are Town bred, Mr. Dashwood, and I have lived here all my life, and you must remember you will have a wet tramp back, eight miles in all."

"Miss Peggy! I do not get so many visitors that I begrudge them my company if they care to have it."

"Ah! you find it dull!" said she in kindly tones. "No wonder, you are all alone! There were so many of *us*. I used to be father's 'curate!' We all had our parts, and then in the evening we were so happy! in the warm days out in the summer-house and the garden, and in the winter time in the long parlour." And there was a pathetic droop in the voice—it was past, it was over! Each had to go out in the cold world, and Peggy Orme said no word, but walked on with compressed lips.

"I hope you are not very wet?" he asked gently.

"Oh no! I think not," she answered indifferently, as if mere physical discomfort were of so small importance, compared with the loss of her home and the father she loved, "I can change directly I get to the Hall.

"Are we far off now?"

"Oh no, about half a mile."

The rain came down in torrents, and the thunder and lightning did their worst. There was nothing for it but to go through it. There was no shelter anywhere.

"I am *so* sorry for you," she said with regretful kindness.

"Why?"

"Because you are not used to it. Any one could tell you are a townsman."

"Is that a great blot in your idea?" he asked coldly.

"Surely not! Only I am used to these long marches, and you cannot be."

"I shall be calling at the Hall before Sunday, Miss Orme, and will either send or bring your umbrella."

"I thank you most kindly, Mr. Dashwood. Now here we are at the Hall! Won't you come in and dry yourself? Do now!"

"Thank you! I will make the best of my way home. And pray do not think I am such a coddle as not to be able to bear rain or anything else!"

"I *am* sure of it!" and she grasped his hand with frank warm pressure, and with almost regret he retraced his road, now almost a swamp. The storm was gradually dying away. The blue sky was seen again reflected in the streams of water rushing down the cart ruts, and in the puddles.

"Fancy that girl walking alone all this

way," he thought. "Poor, brave, tender-hearted girl, tramping eight miles for a sight of her father's grave!"

Solitude gives one a chance of squaring up one's moral accounts, and Mr. Dashwood had had a good deal of this lately—he began to almost despise himself; his punishment would always be that he had lost Esmé irrevocably. Looking at it in cold blood, he did not regret the loss of Miss Higgins, because there never was the faintest trace of love. There was no doubt, as Miss Orme had said, he was dull! frightfully dull and lonely! He remembered Tilly teasing Mrs. Grantley, and kind old Percy! How they all came crowding upon his thoughts, as he walked quickly to keep himself from taking cold, for he was dripping. The road over the moor looked interminable, but still he tramped on, and it was with grateful feelings that at last the

homely little vicarage, with its gabled roof and russet tiles, came in view. As he passed through the village the people were standing at their doors after the storm, and he was very surprised to hear one or two "good evenings, sir." Generally they allowed him to pass in silence, but they had appreciated his courtesy to their dear old parson's daughter. They had seen the large posy of roses, which they knew he had cut her, and they saw him return wet to the skin, having seen her quite safely to her destination. This was all quite right in their estimation, so they greeted him kindly as he passed. He returned it courteously, for Peggy Orme's words came back to him, "They are so affectionate!" Perhaps, as Percy Blythe said—he should make some advances to them. Anyway he would try, and unconsciously they had helped him.

CHAPTER XVII.

"So you don't like the character of 'Mr. Lofty,'" said Sabina Maitland, with mischief in her tone.

"No!" said he, "decidedly I don't."

"And why?"

"Oh, he's such a cad, don't you know!" said his lordship, ruefully sticking his eye-glass firmly in his eye. "Why could not Mr. Vere have given me 'Leontine'? then I could have made love to 'Olivia'—cousin Pauline, you know."

"Then you are a good hand at making love? I should not have thought it."

"Shouldn't you? Ah! May I ask your reason?" said he, nettled.

"Not strong enough—everything seems such an effort, everything bores you so."

"You're chaffing a fellow, Miss Maitland!"

"I never chaff a lord—only common people! Would you not have liked to have made love to me? I am 'Miss Richland,' don't you know?" said Sabina, wickedly mocking his languid tones.

"Oh! come now, I say, Miss Maitland! you are too bad; it isn't kind to make game of a fellow! I know I am stupid and all that, don't you know!—and—and if I loved you ever so much, I could not make love to *you*, you would frighten it out of me, you are so down upon a fellow!"

"Well, make yourself happy! I don't want you to make love to me in any form, either in the play or out of it! *When* I get a lover, he shall be strong and brave! 'None but the brave deserve the fair!'"

Poor Lord Frampton was certainly having a bad time of it, and it was all the

more painful to his feelings because he really had a *tendresse* for Sabina—her dark piquant face, her beautiful hair, her very impertinence had an irresistible attraction. Most of the young ladies of his acquaintance thought a *very* great deal of him—listened to his words, admired his delicate, languid ways. And here was a girl who turned up her nose, as it were, at him—who told him to his face he wasn't fit for anything—not even for a stage lover! butthat she preferred somebody strong and brave!

"It's some other fellow she's got her eye on, d— him!"

"What are you muttering to yourself, Lord Frampton, over there?"

"Nothing!" he answered somewhat curtly.

"What a rude young man you are for a lord! I thought they were so polite."

"Oh, Miss Sabina! do behave decently to a fellow! I am sure I would do *anything* to please you!"

"Well, then, take that absurd eyeglass away. At your age you ought to have good eyesight!" And then she came near to him, her pretty face just in reach of him. "Why you really have very nice blue eyes. You can see me, I suppose, very distinctly?"

"That I can," said he briskly enough. "Come and sit down by me, and I will do anything!"

"No, no; I can see you *very* well from here; and if you would only pull yourself together you wouldn't be really at all bad—but you want backbone. Now I must really go. Good bye, for the present."

"Miss Sabina! I implore you!" but she was gone.

So he sat there thinking: "I wonder why she thinks me such a confounded ass?" And there isn't a woman I would please sooner than her," and he was really unhappy.

Then Sabina put her mocking face in at the doorway.

"'Mr. Lofty' is wanted."

And "Mr. Lofty" was sent to a warm place.

Then he rose, and really did pull himself together, for he hastened after her.

"Miss Maitland!"

"Well?"

"Do you think so very badly of me?"

"Why should I think about you at all?"

"But you need not be cruel!"

"Well, let us shake hands and be friends!"

And she held out her hand. He not

only took it, but kissed it, and held it tight.

"Upon my word, Lord Frampton! Come, they are calling 'Miss Richland;' don't you hear?"

"Let them call."

"Come, let me go."

"Say, 'Please, Frampton.'"

"That I won't," she answered angrily.

"'Miss Richland' is wanted! 'Miss Richland!'"

"Dear Lord Frampton, do let me go."

So at last he did, and she flew away.

"Ah, I see! She wants mastering. She will always despise me. She thinks I am a soft, useless creature. And I believe I am when you come to look at me in that light. What can I do now? I wish they had given me a decent part—'stage lover.' She thinks I am not even up to *that*. That cur 'Lofty' has only to make himself a

thorough cad all round! I want backbone, do I? Well, I'll get it. And she shall see how she likes it!"—and he gave a vicious tug at the eyeglass. And then he too went into rehearsal.

"Charlie, do you think Cousin Frampton will ever do any good? I am sorry we let him have a part; he does seem so stupid. Sometimes I should like to shake him."

"I think, Pauline, that saucy little Sabina Maitland has something to say to it. She teases him so."

"Serve him right, Charlie. I have no patience with him."

"Now, Pauline, that isn't really fair. I do not think he is half a bad sort. He is only like hundreds of young men, and two to one isn't fair. He really is trying to do the best with his part. Now do be nice to him, dear. You can't expect perfection out of everybody."

"Very well, Charlie, dear, I *will* try," replied Pauline. "Here comes mother!"

And Lady Laura was seen making her way with Canon Frampton.

"Why, Uncle Harry, this is a pleasure. I did not know you were in town."

"Well, my dear, I have only just arrived, and finding your mother was starting off to you, I thought I would just drop in and see what you were doing."

"How is the play getting on, dear?" said Lady Laura.

Oh, very well. Frampton is a little slow."

"What part have you given him, Pauline?"

"'Mr. Lofty,'" said she, with a laugh, "and he doesn't like it."

"Why did you give him such a dis-

agreeable character? Could not you have given him a nicer part?"

"We didn't want him at all, to start with, and he must make the best of it. Oh, Uncle Harry, you shall have the *best* place in the room—you and Aunt Louisa. Adolphus is coming!"

"Indeed, my dear! And what may this wonderful performance be?"

"'The Good-natured Man!' We are condensing it a little so as to make it shorter; but it is more of a novelty—so few people have seen it. Here comes Frampton!"

The young lord came in without his usual friend—his eye-glass. But they certainly had sharpened him up a little, Lady Laura thought; for he was absolutely brisk.

"How do you do, Aunt Laura?"

"How are you getting on Arthur? I hear you are going to act."

"I hope I shall succeed, Aunt Laura; that is all I can say at present."

"I am sure you will, dear," said her ladyship encouragingly.

He brightened at this, for he had not been overdone with encomiums so far.

"Here is your second— or third cousin!—Cousin Frampton—Louisa's husband."

The Rector shook hands with him.

"I haven't seen you since you were a very small boy!"

Then all the other dramatis personæ entered, and the conversation became bright and general; no one enjoying it more than the Rector, who stayed to luncheon, and quite regretted when the time came for Lady Laura to drive him home again.

"What a dear, bright child Pauline is to be sure! She does one no end of good," said her uncle heartily.

"I believe she is very happy," said her mother. "And Mr. Vere *is* so kind to her! Yes, I am glad now as it is."

Twelfth Night came at last, and with it the play. A large audience had been collected. Lord Frampton had been nervously anxious to make the most of his part, and when the night came he felt he was as perfect as could be; he was determined to show Sabina Maitland that he had "some backbone." To Adolphus Frampton's great delight, he had given to him the small part of "Lofty's French servant," owing to the illness of the young man who was to have acted it. Lady Louisa was as much gratified as her son. The Rector was doubtful. Three prettier women than Pauline, Sabina, and Eva Mountchesney—who was a blonde—would be hard to find.

The charming drawing-room had been curtained off, and the inner one arranged

for the performance. Every detail had been carefully studied. Rehearsal had succeeded rehearsal, so that as nearly as possible they reached perfection. In their eighteenth-century costumes they looked charming.

To the surprise of all, Lord Frampton acquitted himself admirably; it was a thankless part at the best, but it was a success.

Lady Laura congratulated him warmly, and so did her sister. Adolphus had very nearly wrecked the whole thing by disappearing just when he was wanted, but fortunately he did turn up.

"Well, Miss Maitland, haven't you a word to fling to a fellow?"

"What do you wish me to say, Lord Frampton?"

"Well, to begin with. How did I do?"

"Honestly, then, you 'did' better than any of us."

The pale face of Lord Frampton flushed with pleasure. And it looked really handsome in his picturesque dress.

"What pleasure you have given me! Won't you reward me with the first dance? That is only fair; because I tried to please you!"

"Well, I don't mind that." And as Sabina brought her bewitching face, with a charming smile, to bear on him, he felt in the seventh heaven.

So these two were satisfied.

Pauline had collected a great many celebrities, and the success of these theatricals had established her reputation. She was full of delight, and a celebrated painter desired to paint her portrait in her quaint costume, as "Olivia" in the "Good-natured Man."

Sabina came in for much applause. She, from a sallow, sickly girl, had grown into a handsome young woman; her clear brunette face, her large dark eyes, her pretty slender form, and her saucy coquettish tricks captivated even the unimpressable heart of Mr. Adolphus Frampton, who hovered about her, to the evident annoyance of his lordly cousin, who was heard in *sotto-voce* tones to declare his readiness to kick that young cub! And Miss Sabina played off on both her admirers.

It was a delightful evening, without one drawback, so that justly could be said of these pleasant drawing-room actors:—

"Blame where you must, be candid where you can,
And be each critic the *Good-natured Man!*"

END OF VOL. II.

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